

# ROBINSON JEFFERS

## *A Study in Inhumanism*

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Mercedes Cunningham Monjian




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# ROBINSON JEFFERS

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## *Foreword*

Robinson Jeffers' name has become so inseparably linked with the state of California that it is difficult to think of his origins being elsewhere. But the Carmel county with its fog-dipped coastline edging the glistening Pacific is the adopted home of the poet.

Robinson Jeffers, christened John Robinson Jeffers, was born on January 10, 1887 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in the section then known as Allegheny. His father, Dr. William Hamilton Jeffers, who held the chair of Old Testament literature and exegesis at the Western Theological Seminary, was a devoted scholar of ancient languages. His rich background and professional capability made it natural that he should personally supervise his son's early education. It was for these reasons that Robinson Jeffers, like John Stuart Mill, learned to read Greek before he was of school age. A trip to England and the continent, private schools, and his father's disciplining tutelage all converged to insure the boy's accelerated scholarship. At Twin Hollows, the family's estate in Sewickley, young Jeffers was allowed to enjoy the free hours from his father's library in swimming and in taking long walks over the wooded lands around his home.

In 1902, after an intervening trip to Europe and some formal schooling in Switzerland and Germany, he enrolled for his sophomore year at the University of Pittsburgh, which at that time was

the University of Western Pennsylvania. His brief enrollment there was interrupted by a necessary family move because of his father's health—this time across country to California.

In the following years he graduated from Occidental College at the age of eighteen, later studied at the University of Southern California and at the University of Washington. He married Una Call Kuster in 1913.

His eventual, and it seems inevitable, "meeting" with the Big Sur country brought Robinson Jeffers to a place of resolution. Its violence, its primitive seclusion, its exotic beauties vividly emerge in hundreds of lines of his poetry.

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## INTRODUCTION

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Man's inhumanity to man has long been a theme favored by the poets. But inhumanity bears little affinity to "Inhumanism."

Inhumanism is the label that Robinson Jeffers gave to his doctrine in the Preface to *The Double Axe and Other Poems* which was published twenty-four years after his first successful book. Many critics and reviewers, before *The Double Axe*, had attempted to define Jeffers' creed, but none had succeeded in designating its meaning with his precision.

Since one phase of humanism is "a system of thinking in which man, his interests, and development, are made dominant,"<sup>1</sup> then inhumanism would, by its negative prefix, deny man's "interests, and development," subduing them in the interests of something greater. Or, as Jeffers aptly explains it, inhumanism is "a shifting of emphasis and significance from man to not-man."<sup>2</sup>

All of Jeffers' poetry demonstrates this denial of man's importance and potential, contrasting it against the magnificent beauty and immense worth of the natural world. The poet's lavish regard for nature and his undercutting of man, together, work to produce the basic principles on which his philosophy is founded.

Although inhumanism is unique as a definitive

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term, it is eclectic as a philosophy, drawing upon past moods and systems of thought for its motivation. The Byronic man, rebellious against humanity and happiest as a part of the violence of nature, may be seen in Jeffers' writing. The cosmic musings and prophecies of Shelley in his search for perfection parallel Jeffers' but at the same time exceed the later poet's hopes. Wordsworth's pantheism resembles Jeffers' reverent worship of the set of forces which control the universe and the beauties of the earth. Also in the poetry of Jeffers may be seen the stern discipline of stoicism, Nietzsche's sense of mission, the atomic naturalism of Lucretius, the cyclical theories of Spengler. Such poets and philosophers have contributed their thinking to inhumanism; Jeffers merges them into his own newly arranged, twentieth century concept.

Since Jeffers' philosophy is so deeply rooted in all of his poetry, permeating the long narratives as well as the short lyrics, it seems necessary to consider this author from two different views, letting the philosopher dominate the first view, the poet, the second. Such a partial separation can logically be derived from the two distinct motives which appear to control his writing. First is the philosopher's: the search for and the revelation of a rational knowledge derived from science and the natural laws; second is the poet's, which underscores a message to humanity through a medium that should, if used according to Jeffers' concepts,<sup>3</sup> insure its permanence. While the doctrine is uppermost in the mind of the philosopher-poet, permanence has the greatest significance for the poet-philosopher. Much has been said by Jeffers on the

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subject of poetry speaking across the years. It was tempting from his viewpoint to base the concluding evaluation on the possibilities of his survival as a future poet. But this plan seemed not only fanciful and therefore impractical, but also presumptuous. With each new wave in religious revival, new directions in philosophical thinking, new scientific and psychological studies, we cannot be certain that human values will not change, as Jeffers believes they must, if man is not to "drown in despair when his days darken."<sup>4</sup>

The poet has spent many hundreds of lines in trying to teach his readers the great good to be derived from inhumanism. He has also made clear many of his ideas about requirements for creating great poetry, so that we are aware of Jeffers' imposed artistic responsibilities, as well as his standards for presenting his religion. These views are clearly explained; major conflicts do arise, however, from the poetry, as this essay will illustrate later on. When these deviations are in the province of the poet's personal response and his doctrinal theories, the essay will merely point out and reflect upon what may be intentional, but unresolved, opposing logic, since there is no peremptory way of accounting for it. But the essay's main and final problems will be two: first, to attempt to show whether Jeffers is primarily a philosopher or a poet; secondly, to determine how successful he is in presenting the new doctrine of inhumanism.

The first two books written by Jeffers, *Flagons and Apples* and *Californians*, will not be discussed in this paper because we are considering only the mature Jeffers, the Jeffers of reputation, whose doctrine as well as his poetic line had solidified by

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the time he published his third book, *Tamar and Other Poems*. About *Flagons and Apples*, his first book, the poet writes that he told his publisher to have the 480 remaining copies of the original 500 pulped, "thinking that perhaps their substance would save a young forest-tree from the paper mills."<sup>5</sup> His publisher did not comply. Later, after the poet had gained recognition with *Tamar*, and the remaining copies had found their way into many hands, he lamented the fact that "it has become impossible for me to buy them up and drown them, as I should like to."<sup>6</sup> From these critical judgments it seems certain that the poet, himself, finds nothing of value in his first books and hopes they will be forgotten. Therefore they will not be included here.

The objective truthfulness that Jeffers employs to express such opinions is allied to an inherent quality in the philosopher and poet. It is the quality of integrity, so necessary to sustain this poetry that expounds the new vision of inhumanism. His truthfulness about artistic matters is paralleled by his determination to be honest in all his findings, regardless of the cost to himself:

I thought, "What a pity our kindest dreams  
Are complete liars," and turned from the glowing west  
toward the cold twilight. "To be truth-bound, the  
neutral  
Detested by all the dreaming factions, is my errand  
here."<sup>7</sup>

Because Jeffers adopted a philosophy whose essence possessed the truth for him and lived by some of the tenets of this philosophy, the poet has been and is a lonely man walking a lonely road. As a young man, when the Calvinist faith of his



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father, a devout and learned theologian, failed Jeffers, he turned to scientific reading for many answers which his faith could not supply. Also, having been disillusioned by the First World War fought by Christian nations supposedly founded on love, and by their struggle for power at the cost of young lives, he, a super-sensitive and despondent man looking for a creed based on truth, abandoned his boyhood religion.<sup>8</sup> Once convinced that he had chosen rightly, Jeffers has never deviated from the original concept. Even though apparent inconsistencies may arise upon close inspection of the poetry, Jeffers overall, long-range integrity of direction and purpose cannot be challenged. However austere his doctrine may be, regardless of the strange waters he has to cross, he pursues the underlying truth it reveals and makes no compromise. In "Dear Judas," Lazarus, who may be called an inhumanist, having rejected man, pleads for the truth:

... there is only one pathway to peace for  
a great passion. Truth is the way, take the truth  
Against your breast and endure its horns. So life will  
at last be conquered.<sup>9</sup>

Enduring the horns of truth, straining for the truth, has always been an obsession with Robinson Jeffers, as with another of his protagonists. Bruce Ferguson, in "Mara," searches for the brutal truth:

"... I wish to God I had some religion." He paced  
back and forth  
Under the inverted valley of the roof, the lamplight  
making odd work in the eaves-corners with his  
shadow,  
And thought, "not if it's lies or delusion, like all of  
them  
Up to this moment. I want the truth. The truth  
Even if it poisons us or makes beasts of us..."<sup>10</sup>

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Ferguson, as Jeffers claims in the poem, "For Una," is "someways/ My very self but mostly my antipodes."<sup>11</sup> Bruce Ferguson, unable to endure his discovery of truth in its devastating nakedness, destroys himself.

We can never certainly attribute to a poet the ideas his characters may express, but it is significant that many of Jeffers' lines are concerned with the consequences of strain and pain, and the strengthening qualities that they produce in man. Prometheus says:

... without strain there is nothing.

.....

I torture myself

To discover myself; trying with a little or extreme  
experiment each nerve and fibril, all forms  
Of being, of life, of cold substance; all motions and  
netted complications of event,  
All poisons of desire, love, hatred, joy, partial peace,  
partial vision. Discovery is deep and endless...<sup>12</sup>

In the last poem in his most recent book the poet writes, "I am bound by my own thirty-year-old decision: who drinks the wine/ Should take the dregs; even in the bitter lees and sediment/ New discovery may lie."<sup>13</sup>

Discovery is an absolute essential in the creative mind, no matter to what depths it may have to plunge to satisfy its scrutiny. Karl Shapiro, in an essay that involves some of the psychological processes in the making of poetry, asks whether an artist may be considered different (sicker) than a business man, scientist, or philosopher, and answers, "I believe he is, for this reason. It is the nature of the creative mind to familiarize itself with depths of memory, desire, sensation and all

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the remote quadrants of its being that the speculative or the commercial mind has no need of, and indeed shuns for its own safety. It is certainly true that a great deal—perhaps most—poetry also shuns these subterranean places.”<sup>14</sup> Mr. Shapiro is considering poets in general, but a similar observation about Jeffers in particular was made as early as 1928. Applauding the poet’s deep search for truth, L. S. Morris writes, “He has at least dared to risk his sanity in considering those things of which a major poet sings.”<sup>15</sup>

To understand the immense effort that is expended to penetrate to the core of his own and man’s destiny, however much some may disagree with the final solution, is to read the best of Jeffers with admiration. He spares nothing of himself. And as he probes and is illuminated, so he speaks:

Sometime at the last gasp comes peace  
To every soul.  
Never to mine until I find out and speak  
The things that I know.<sup>16</sup>

We can feel easily the exigency of a man eager to express himself without regard for agreement of opinion from any one person or group. To the extent that his integrity would not allow him to shun the depths of sensation, neither would it allow him to suppress the convictions of his political views or to hedge on artistic standards as he conceives them. If themes of incest, murder, and suicide are best suited to the revelation of his doctrine, these are what he uses. During a discussion with Benjamin de Casseres about the subject of incest in Jeffers’ poems, Una Jeffers asked her husband, “Robin, when will you quit forbidden themes?” Her husband answered, “I shall change

"my themes when the heart of man and woman  
 changeth—which will not be tomorrow!"<sup>17</sup>

Jeffers has maintained integrity of style from his first successful volume, *Tamar and Other Poems*, to his last, *Hungerfield and Other Poems*, published 30 years later. It is a singular style, slashing its way across the page with violence of image and a free, crashing rhythm. Clearly marked with Jeffers' signet, his poetic medium was chosen after others had been eliminated because they were not suitable for what he had to say. He discarded the idea of working in free verse because its appeal was "strictly limited and temporary,"<sup>18</sup> and we shall see how intensely Jeffers has been concerned with permanence. Blank verse could not serve him either, as he explains, "Blank verse I could not use, because it has been so much used by such masters, it carries their impress and inflections. I think I am at length discovering rhymeless narrative measures of my own."<sup>19</sup> And so it becomes evident that the artist and craftsman is as concerned with integrity of medium as the philosopher is with the content. He is "never a slave to the popular cant of the market-place or the literary salon,"<sup>20</sup> nor does he conceal his meaning "in any of the fashionable contortions of symbolic double-talk."<sup>21</sup> Jeffers, if he cared sufficiently for admiring criticism, would be happy to know to what extent his integrity is commended, for he has great admiration for this abstraction. In "The Answer" he writes a tribute to it:

To keep one's own integrity, be merciful and uncorrupted and not wish for evil; and not be duped  
 By dreams of universal justice or happiness. These  
 dreams will not be fulfilled.

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To know this, and know that however ugly the parts  
appear the whole remains beautiful. A severed hand  
Is an ugly thing, and man dissevered from the earth  
and stars and his history . . . for contemplation or  
in fact . . .

Often appears atrociously ugly. Integrity is whole-  
ness, the greatest beauty is

Organic wholeness, the wholeness of life and things,  
the divine beauty of the universe.<sup>22</sup>

Now that we are acquainted with this integral  
quality in the character of the artist, we may better  
see how indispensable a requisite it is for the  
poetic support of his doctrine.



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## THE PHILOSOPHER-POET

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### THE DOCTRINE DEFINED

Because I  
have suddenly awakened, I will not waste inward  
Upon humanity, having found a fairer object.<sup>1</sup>

Orestes, of all Jeffers' characters, most perfectly projects the discovery and the meaning of the doctrine of inhumanism. Having killed his mother, who represents his closest human tie, Orestes, mad with guilt, flees into the forest. It is from the forest that he gains a new perspective, much as the characters in *As You Like It* take a long-range view of life away from the corruptions of the court. But while their view is relaxed, Orestes' is intense and mystical. He begins to identify himself with nature:

... and I was the stream  
Draining the mountain wood; and I the stag drinking;  
and I was the stars,  
Boiling with light, wandering alone, each one the  
lord of his own summit; and I was the darkness  
Outside the stars, I included them, they were a part  
of me. I was mankind also, a moving lichen  
On the cheek of the round stone... they have not  
made words for it, to go behind things, beyond  
hours and ages,  
And be all things in all time, in their returns and  
passages, in the motionless and timeless center,  
In the white of the fire... how can I express the  
excellence I have found...<sup>2</sup>



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Nature has become his "fairer object" to which he climbs, the approach to "The Tower beyond Tragedy." No longer is he turned inward on a consuming love for his own kind; instead, he is released into a harmonious unity of cosmic proportions that restores his sanity. Significant in the above passage is the idea that Orestes is a part of nature and nature is a part of him and that they are "all things in all time." This interchange of physical substance and spiritual essence is the heart of Jeffers' godhead, which is omnisecular. This god is everywhere, and all things are a part of this god.

Yet the god can be cruel and careless because there is "no reason/ For fire and change and torture and the old returnings."<sup>3</sup> He is "Our unkindly all but inhuman God,"<sup>4</sup> and "The eternal living and untroubled God/ Lying asleep upon a lily bed"<sup>5</sup> throughout the war's disasters. These examples may lead one to think that Jeffers rages against his god's pitiless actions, but Jeffers also sees beauty in the destruction that is wrought upon mankind. With an impartial mind and scientific detachment, he perceives his god as a "beautiful power/ That piles up cities for the poem of their fall/ And gathers multitude like game to be hunted when the season comes."<sup>6</sup> The beauty that Jeffers is able to realize is founded on the "whole fabric"<sup>7</sup> and on the order of nature, whether it brings ruin and death by violence or nourishment through its bounty. Against this beauty is pitted the puniness of man:

Indeed it is hard to see beauty  
In any of the acts of man: but that means the acts of  
a sick microbe  
On a satellite of a dust-grain twirled in a whirlwind



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In the world of stars. . . .

Something perhaps may come of him; in any event

He can't last long.<sup>8</sup>

This kind of thinking evidences Jeffers' rebellion against the anthropocentric idea that man has attained over the years of his history. Jeffers, like Job, struggles with the problem of non-attachment. When Job no longer feels himself to be the center of the universe, he is able to accept God's inflictions with understanding, just as Jeffers accepts his god's injustices with unflinching devotion. The poet, seeking for truth and authority "in one's own conscience and the beauty of things,"<sup>9</sup> cannot rationalize that man, placed here by God, is the center of anything, especially of a system of unknowable immensity. And if this anthropocentric impression cannot be proved, then man has built an unrealistic dream-world for himself and spends most of his days dealing with illusions and resulting chaos. Jeffers believes that such illusions are responsible for the unhappiness of man. Like Freud, who has had considerable influence on Jeffers,<sup>10</sup> he knows only too well "the general unhappiness which is the usual lot of mankind,"<sup>11</sup> and would lessen it through his individualistic religion. We must not lose sight of the fact that although Jeffers may seem heartless upon a superficial reading, he is constantly, often to his artistic detriment, offering what he honestly believes is the best possible solution for our unhappiness: to flee from the totalitarianism of self and humanity into a worship of the order and beauty of nature.

Besides the concept of divinity and the sustaining force a religion may offer to living man, there is another aspect which every religion extends:

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some measure and meaning of death. From the preceding discussion of Jeffers' doctrine, it becomes almost certain that the poet will have no illusion about an afterlife conceived on faith, alone. Being indoctrinated in laboratory research and scientific readings (Jeffers was a medical student at the University of Southern California for several years as well as a student of forestry at the University of Washington), he was not able to believe in an immortal soul that retained an identification with its earthly body, an "eternal personal immortality after the organism has fallen apart."<sup>12</sup> Being aware of the immutability of matter, he could not systematically arrive at a conclusion which he glorifies in many poems: complete annihilation, a finite termination of the body which cannot succeed into any kind of new life. Even though he could cut himself off from humanity while living, he could not effect such a plan after death. He attributes such a wish to Shakespeare, who had written for his tombstone, "Spare these stones. Curst be he that moves my bones." In the same poem Jeffers goes on:

But why did the good man care? For he wanted  
quietness.

He had tasted enough life in his time  
To stuff a thousand; he wanted not to swim wide  
In waters, nor wander the enormous air,  
Nor grow into grass, enter through the mouths of  
cattle

The bodies of lusty women and warriors,  
But all be finished. He knew it feelingly; the game  
Of the whirling circles had become tiresome.  
"Annihilation's impossible, but insulated  
In the church under the rhyming flagstone  
Perhaps my passionate ruins may be kept off market  
To the end of this age. Oh, a thousand years

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Will hardly leach," he thought, "this dust of that fire."<sup>13</sup>

This interpretation of Shakespeare's thoughts of death is negative. In another poem we can see the affirmative beauty that Jeffers creates in his vision of the unity of man with nature:

I admired the beauty  
While I was human, now I am part of the beauty.  
I wander in the air,  
Being mostly gas and water, and flow in the ocean;  
Touch you and Asia  
At the same moment; have a hand in the sunrises  
And the glow of this grass.  
I left a light precipitate of ashes to earth  
For a love-token.<sup>14</sup>

"He sees the cosmic system unfolding itself, step by step, from unity to multiplicity, and returning to unity again"<sup>15</sup> in the same way that man descending to death returns to primordial life. Cyclical change underlies Jeffers' thinking and writing from his concept of history and civilizations to the flux of life and matter in an up-and-down movement. The downward sweep into death and disintegration is accompanied by the great gift of peace. Jeffers writes some of his most beautiful lines to the peace of the unconscious. In "Suicide's Stone" his praise of peace is translated into a kind of purring language suggestive of the quietness of this inert state:

Peace is the heir of dead desire,  
Whether abundance killed the cormorant  
In a happy hour, or sleep or death  
Drowned him deep in dreamy waters,  
Peace is the ashes of that fire,  
The heir of that king, the inn of that journey.  
This last and best and goal: we dead

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Hold it so tight you are envious of us  
And fear under sunk lids contempt.  
Death-day greetings are the sweetest.  
Let the trumpets roar when a man dies  
And rockets fly up, he has found his fortune.<sup>16</sup>

The last two lines, rising from repose into quickening triumph, show how life is made bearable only because it ends in death. To this idea of the peace that death brings, an extension or qualification becomes apparent as we read Jeffers. The mere act of dying is not sufficient in itself; it must be the right kind of dying as Harold Watts explains so well in "Eating the Serpent." In this essay he points out that Jeffers' ghosts "assert a certainty; that death is useless in which the dead continue the desires of their purely human existence. Jeffers is almost orthodox in his insistence that one must die unto the world."<sup>17</sup> Only for the person or character, such as Tamar Cauldwell, Gudrun, and Lazarus, who has adequately renounced himself, so that he is rid of the passion for humanity, can death end in peace. Otherwise, death becomes as insatiable as life, and there is only a recurrence of desire.

To the Jeffers' reader who is incessantly reminded that there is no elemental explanation of this philosophic poetry, the preceding paragraphs will appear over-simplified without enough attention given to the deviations and tangents which are peculiar to this author. But for the above discussion the concern is only with basic ideas which are central to all the writing.

### *Symbolism*

Another constant throughout this poetry is the use of symbols, especially three: the rock, the

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hawk, and incest—incest used to symbolize man's inversion. Hawks and eagles, sea granite, and lichen-coated boulders are part of the wonder of Jeffers' country. He has allied himself to them and found in them divine qualities that have become symbols in his religion. Half-revealing, half-concealing, these two symbols denote many things, but they are inevitably used to heighten characteristics which humanity has neglected to develop fully. The rock is symbolic of detachment, endurance, strength, and the absence of passion, qualities for which man longs in various degrees, but whose attainment pales beside stone. In so many of his poems Jeffers compares his life and the minute life-span of man to the long duration of rock that waits like a sentinel as the centuries pass and new ages replace old ones:

... this age will die,  
And wolves have howled in the snow around a new  
Bethlehem: this rock will be here, grave, earnest,  
not passive: the energies  
That are its atoms will still be bearing the whole  
mountain above: and I, many packed centuries ago,  
Felt its intense reality with love and wonder, this  
lonely rock.<sup>18</sup>

It is important to notice that Jeffers stresses the rock's non-passivity, an attribute that may be overlooked because he uses the rock symbolically for a state opposed to passion, a contrast to the fury of human emotions. Judas, pictured as a man who wounds himself by feeling the pain of others, cries out, "The shepherd is happy:/ but Oh happy happy rock."<sup>19</sup> He envies the rock's detachment, the antithesis of his supersensitivity, yet detachment requires energy to maintain its disinterested

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state. That is to say, the rock is not merely a clod of non-being. The poet highly esteems disinterestedness, even suggesting that it be used for a standard "To hang in the future sky" together with the savage awareness of the hawk.<sup>20</sup> While the stone performs an admirable function for Jeffers, a humanist speaks out against the idea, "I should assert that the only escape from our muddle is to overthrow this idol of Unity, this Demon of the Absolute, this abortion sprung from the union of science and metaphysics, and to submit ourselves humbly to the stubborn and irreducible fact that a stone and the human soul cannot be brought under the same definition."<sup>21</sup>

The hawk, also, has been a great inspiration to Robinson Jeffers. He has written magnificent lines in praise of this family of birds, going so far as to compare qualities in his wife with those of a falcon: "She is more like a woman in a Scotch ballad, passionate, untamed and rather heroic—or like a falcon—than like any ordinary person."<sup>22</sup> In contrast to the stone, which represents "dark peace" and "calm death," "the falcon's/ Realist eyes and act" represent a "fierce consciousness."<sup>23</sup> Alive with power, it maintains its life at any cost. It functions like all nature: to survive. This kind of integrity stirs Jeffers' imagination, because, knowing the falcon's cruelty is essential, he sees its beauty and majesty in direct opposition to man's careful, deliberate actions. Always concerned with the softness of humanity, he uses the falcon's cruelty to make his point:

In pleasant peace and security  
How suddenly the soul in a man begins to die.  
He shall look up above the stalled oxen



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Envyng the cruel falcon,  
And dig under the straw for a stone  
To bruise himself on.<sup>24</sup>

Often the hawk is injured, as in "Cawdor" and "Hurt Hawks." In each poem it is mercifully killed to release its spirit which, in that moment between life and complete death, soars into the freedom of the skies. One of Jeffers' early admirers sees this symbol "as 'the archetype body of life,' passionate, wounded, and bound," and also as revealing the poet's "hovering pity for humanity."<sup>25</sup> This interpretation seems to be a possibility, but I believe that Jeffers' pity would be expended only on that primal part of man, stripped of sham and illusion. The hawk represents the best to Jeffers: strength of purpose, urgency without restriction, and the natural nobility of an untamed creature—a purity synonymous with his nature-god.

A difficulty in understanding Jeffers is seen by one critic to be dependent on "the fact that Jeffers, like Blake, has invented a language of his own."<sup>26</sup> Certainly this is true. But most readers of poetry are aware that symbolism is not expected to be completely understood. A good symbol varies with many shadings of meaning, obvious and hidden, and Jeffers' symbolism is no exception. Yet his use of incest in the narratives is less changeable. He "uses it as a symbol of the failure to achieve a non-human fate."<sup>27</sup> In "The Tower Beyond Tragedy," if Orestes had succumbed to his original desire of incest with Electra, he would have estranged himself from the discovery of inhumanism and converged into a draining love for man. Reverend Barclay, in *The Women at Point Sur*, struggling against a tendency to exhaust him-

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self on the love of his flock, breaks away to find a new god and a new law. Even in his search he gathers disciples around him, and his image reproaches him with, "If you did not love them would you labor to lead them?"<sup>28</sup> But Barclay is mad, vacillating between his quest and his old habits. In his battle with insanity he seduces his daughter, April, who symbolizes his inverted love for man, and later he wanders away babbling into the hills to die, a man whose passions have overwhelmed his reason. Perhaps it is for the reason Jeffers, the storyteller, gives us:

I say that if the mind centers on humanity  
And is not dulled, but remains powerful enough to  
feel its own and others, the mind will go mad.<sup>29</sup>

Incest, or an inclination to incest, is present in other narratives, too. We see it used in "The Cretan Woman," "Cawdor," "Such Counsels You Gave to Me," "The Love and the Hate," and "Tamar." It is impossible to think of Jeffers without thinking of his symbolic use of incest, and also it is hard to think of another device that would be as completely illustrative of the idea of man turning in upon himself through an overweening self-love.

### THE DOCTRINE DEFLECTED

Many of Robinson Jeffers' most sympathetic critics have been interested in the conflicts that arise from his poetry. Some try to resolve them; others mention them and then go on to other matters. Radcliffe Squires believes that all of these conflicts are a result of "his own essential conflict between death and resurrection."<sup>30</sup> George Kiley,



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in an unpublished dissertation on the short poems, trusts that some of the ambiguities are not "mere confusion."<sup>31</sup> F. I. Carpenter, after stating that understanding Jeffers is dependent upon the fundamental values involved, continues to say that "many of his statements on this subject are contradictory."<sup>32</sup> Jeffers' opponents throw up their hands at his inconsistencies and build their critical material on that basis.<sup>33</sup> Whether or not we agree with Shelley's idealized vision of the poet, it is pertinent here to consider what he says in reference to the poet who presents a new philosophy:

But poets, or those who imagine and express this indestructible order, are not only the authors of language and of music, of the dance, and architecture, and statuary, and painting; they are the institutors of laws, and the founders of civil society, and the inventors of the arts of life, and the teachers who draw into a certain propinquity with the beautiful and the true that partial apprehension of the agencies of the invisible world which is called religion. Hence all original religions are allegorical, or susceptible of allegory, and like Janus, have a double face of false and true.<sup>34</sup>

If this statement is applicable without question, it might mitigate some of the conflicts that are excrescences in this religion of Jeffers. We know that conflict is an essential ingredient of any work of literature, especially of poetry. But the conflicts arising from Jeffers' writing are not the result of attitude or tone, alone; they are not restricted to structural paradoxes which clash before they are resolved at the poem's conclusion. Jeffers' conflicts are often opposing views in logic and personal response which are more closely related to the philosophy than to its expression. If, as Shel-

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ley believes, there is both "false and true" in a religion, when reading this poet we shall have to be content with being aware of apparent contradiction, but not always understanding it.

### *Negation and Affirmation*

Earlier in this essay consideration was given to the doctrine, but only to the kernel that remains stationary. Further inspection leads to the tangents and refutations not spoken of at that time, one of which is the fact that Jeffers does not reject man entirely. Side by side with man's depravity exist inherent traits that heighten his worth, at least to a degree. This vacillation between affirmation and negation weakens the doctrine. Each time the poet attributes a worthwhile quality to man, his philosophy of inhumanism wavers, since it is supposedly an outgrowth of a need to escape from man's perversions and myths. Since negation has been absolute in all the preceding discussion, my only interest here is to point out the fluctuations toward the positive view, however slightly they may affirm the value of man.

Similarities between the misanthropy of Jeffers and Swift come to mind even though one writes in the tragic vein, the other in satire. The resemblance is especially notable in "Roan Stallion." Like Gulliver, who finds paradise with the Houyhnhnms, the horses that are the embodiment of reason and good, California finds her ideal in a magnificent roan stallion, the opposite of her weak, corrupt husband. But, unlike Swift, Jeffers abandons the ultimate in misanthropy when California kills the stallion after he has trampled

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her husband to death. The poet makes atonement to his readers in traditional fashion, giving them what they expect, an eye for an eye when one of their kind has been killed. This demonstration is one of the first in which Jeffers does not go the whole way in carrying out the precepts of his religion, in spite of how they may have caused the narrative to fail artistically and humanistically.

The humanists have leveled many attacks against Jeffers who, they believe, "levels his attack directly at the foundation of humanism, and allies himself with the naturalists who seek salvation in the physical."<sup>35</sup> We cannot quarrel with this statement; the poet is explicit and implicit in his regard for the divinity of nature and the physical world. But when Mr. Thompson says that the logical outcome of Jeffers' creed is the destruction of man and the denial of intrinsic values,<sup>36</sup> there are some few instances that oppose this view:

But all seasons

The earth, in her childlike prophetic sleep,  
Keeps dreaming of the bath of a storm that prepares  
up the long coast  
Of the future to scour more than her sea-lines:  
The cities gone down, the people fewer and the hawks  
more numerous,  
The rivers mouth to source pure; when the two-footed  
Mammal, being someways one of the nobler animals,  
regains  
The dignity of room, the value of rareness.<sup>37</sup>

Although this conclusion is hardly a glorious tribute to man, it is a concession. "One of the nobler animals" is kinder than a frequently used metaphor, "sick microbe," and what is more important, it acknowledges the existence of a quality which Jeffers nearly always denies to men, seeing

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"nobility" only in the majestic beauty of nature. In this poem he advocates improving man by destroying many, so that those remaining will be less contaminated by the nearness of their fellows. Such reasoning bears a distant relation to Rousseau's principle of back-to-nature. The difference would be that Rousseau believed that man was basically good, if he could only escape the yoke of institutions and law. Jeffers does not concede that man is inherently good; but he does believe man is more harmonious as part of nature.

This idea of isolated man living apart from civilization is a basis for some degree of beauty and good he finds in the life of Tom Birnam. Birnam is an old rancher who had lived simply, worked hard, loved the California country, and died there:

This old man died last winter, having  
lived eighty-one years under open sky,  
Concerned with cattle, horses and hunting, no thought  
nor emotion that all his ancestors since the ice-age  
Could not have comprehended. I call that a good life;  
narrow, but vastly better than most  
Men's lives, and beyond comparison more beautiful;  
the wind-struck music man's bones were moulded  
to be the harp for.<sup>38</sup>

From these lines we see that man is capable of living a good life when he is in tune with simple surroundings. Birnam lives by one tenet necessary to the doctrine of inhumanism: the rejection of the city and an easy life. Because of this, Jeffers sees the same unspoiled goodness in the old man as in his primitive ancestors.

Another value Jeffers liberally credits to man is his love of freedom. From the time of Aeschylus to Washington, "one noble passion"<sup>39</sup> has bound

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three ages together. Jeffers, with his ascetic temperament, urges us to keep this love living by keeping it sore:

But keep the tradition, conserve the forms, the observances, keep the spot sore. Be great, carve deep your heelmarks.

The states of the next age will no doubt remember you, and edge their love of freedom with contempt of luxury.<sup>40</sup>

So far we have found three excellences in man: a degree of nobility, harmony and good derived from a simple life, and the love of freedom. The fact remains that, in spite of the austerity of his doctrine, which has labeled him a destroyer of human values and morality and the poet of denial,<sup>41</sup> these examples, and a few others, countermand the generality. Whatever is their reason, whether they are remnants of a once-traditional mind, or are breaches in his new philosophy, they shine through the black fabric of inhumanism with a brighter intensity for being rare. Jeffers may agree with this last statement, for he, too, sees "rare" [as] "dear."<sup>42</sup>

The three quotations above are found in relatively early writings. As Jeffers grows older, he does mellow, as we see in his last book, published in 1954. Certainly he does not relinquish his theory of inhumanism, or his integrity could not be commended, but he does offer more consistent affirmation and even more sympathy toward humanity than in his first editions:

Humanity has its lesser beauty, impure and painful;  
we have to harden our hearts to bear it.

I have hardened my heart only a little: I have learned

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that happiness is important, but pain *gives* importance.

The use of tragedy: Lear becomes as tall as the storm he crawls in: and a tortured Jew became God.<sup>43</sup>

The title of this poem, "The World's Wonders," brings to mind those superb lines from Sophocles' "Choral Ode" in *Antigone*: "Numberless are the world's wonders, but none/ More wonderful than man." Such a divergence makes Jeffers' grade of mellowness a stringent contrast; nevertheless, for Jeffers to mention humanity's beauty, greater or lesser, is welcome. The last idea of pain giving importance is one that Jeffers has long supported as central to his creed. One of the most powerful and illuminating allusions to pain and its value is in "An Artist." Here the artist speaks, but it is a recurrent idea throughout Jeffers' poetry:

I have lived a little and I think  
Peace marrying pain alone can breed that excellence  
in the luckless race, might make it decent  
To exist at all on the star-lit stone breast.<sup>44</sup>

Prometheus is also concerned with the relation of peace and pain: "Without the pain, no knowledge of peace, nothing./ Without the peace./ No value in the pain."<sup>45</sup> Prometheus, whom Jeffers apparently admires, even though he sees frailty in all saviors of mankind, represents this sustaining attitude. Judas represents the compassionate personality who suffers for the pain experienced by all, and who can barely endure the agony of life. Just what significance pain has for the poet is a matter for speculation. Perhaps pain and suffering in humanity are comparable to the violences of nature that cleanse and purify. If man can endure anguish without mentally or physically rebelling,



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he may attain the stoic calm of the granite as it is lashed by the sea. Together, pain and peace may produce a strength and tolerance for which Jeffers, himself, strives and believes he has gained:

(... but the granite sea-boulders are prey to no hawk's wing, they have taken worse pounding,  
Like me they remember  
Old wars and are quiet; for we think that the future  
is one piece with the past, we wonder why tree-tops  
And people are so shaken.)<sup>46</sup>

From this view, pain, as Jeffers is occupied with it, would possess a value which would raise man's virtue one step closer to the nature-god. And in this way pain would be an affirmative value.

But Jeffers is never quite that easy to interpret. The above attitude would lead us to think that the poet has reverence for the importance of pain. Yet, he says in a later volume, "Pain and pleasure are not to be thought important enough to require balancing."<sup>47</sup> This negation leads us back to Jeffers' scientifically controlled reasoning that man, like all other animals, cannot expect any illusions about life which is determined by inconsiderate forces incapable of balancing, even if they were biased toward man, which they are not. The only solution is to become impervious to both pleasure and pain. In this way man may survive as the poet has: shedding "pleasure and pain like hail-stones."<sup>48</sup> Then a further dissent may occur to our minds: if all creativity arises from the pleasure and joy in living, it may be impossible to accept Jeffers' implied devaluation of pleasure. The cycle seems unending in its search for clarification, which is not necessary for the appreciation of

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poetry, but which is helpful in comprehending the basic thoughts that prompt it.

However inconclusive this essay's position will remain on conflicts of belief, it might shed some light to know what the poet has to say of pain and pleasure. "When I think, I know that pleasure and pain counter-balance each other pretty accurately on the average, but when I write verses I am just the opposite apparently of that delightful fellow Ford Madox Ford wrote about, who 'had tried so hard to be a philosopher, but cheerfulness would come creeping in.'"<sup>49</sup> Although this statement does not clarify his values concerning pain and pleasure, it does admit to an engrossment with pain, but a rather casual engrossment, which may make futile much of the speculation that has been done, both here and in other essays.

### *Detachment and Preoccupation*

With both prophetic defiance and theoretical detachment Robinson Jeffers sits on the Pacific's shoreline, contemplating man and his handling of the world's affairs. He veers between an unrelenting judgment that condemns and an idealized inattention that should reserve comment. From his religious tenet which denies man any importance other than his existence as a part of nature, one would think that Jeffers could not sustain interest in this pathetic creature. But it is evidently beyond his power to isolate his interest. He seems to wrestle with himself, giving all the reasons why he should remain unmoved by the headlines; however, some of his writing, so distinctly directed to the world's affairs, reflects his engrossment. In "So



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many Blood-Lakes" he predicts the Third World War and concludes with:

—As for me: laugh at me. I agree with you. It is a foolish business to see the future and screech at it, One should watch and not speak. And patriotism has run the world through so many blood-lakes: and we always fall in.<sup>50</sup>

Jeffers has never hesitated to speak his mind even though he wrote in 1929 that he was "quits with the people."<sup>51</sup> And because he does not hide his political sympathies, he has been severely criticized. One writer calls him "totally irresponsible, politically, poetically, humanly."<sup>52</sup> Another, in reviewing *The Double Axe*, which caused these reverberations, admits that there is a challenge to ignore Jeffers' political issues, and to concentrate on his opinions and attitudes, but he, as reviewer, finds it impossible to do so since the politics are the very essence of the work.<sup>53</sup> It was this book in which Jeffers' publisher included a note to the effect that he could not agree with the views of the poet, that time alone would have to be the judge of their merits. Jeffers' views were probably no surprise to Bennet Cerf, his publisher, since Jeffers had written much earlier, "Of course as a matter of right and justice I sympathize with radicalism; and in any case I don't oppose it; from an abstract point of view there is no reason that I know of for propping and prolonging the period of decadence. Perhaps the more rapid it is, the more rapid comes the new start."<sup>54</sup>

Jeffers deplored America's intervention in the First World War and held to the same opinion regarding the Second War. The thrusts aimed at Roosevelt, Truman, and Churchill are numerous

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throughout *The Double Axe*, while the portrait of Hitler in a preceding volume is overcast with the light of the savior, a megalomaniac, to be sure, but not the sinister one our age knows him to have been. One of Jeffers' central themes is the savior-type, as he conceives it in the Rev. Barclay, in Margrave, in Christ, Prometheus, and Hitler. He endows the savior with delusions that grow into egotism; this in turn grows to self-love and love of power, requiring disciples on which to practice his new power.<sup>55</sup> This conception is not wholesome, yet the poet always expresses a kind of pity toward the great love the savior expends on the people. Perhaps this bent is responsible for some of the lines which Hitler speaks in the masque, "The Bowl of Blood":

But, oh dear God, let me know the rest, and kill myself  
If it is bad. Save what's possible for Germany and kill  
myself

Before the fall.

This is my Gethsemane night, Christ's agony in the  
garden: only to great artists

Come these dark hours.<sup>56</sup>

Here we see Hitler pictured as a martyr, thinking first of his country. Mr. Trevor-Roper in *The Last Days of Hitler* gives us a more realistic account: how, in his maddened frenzy, Hitler pulled all of Berlin down with him "to illuminate his Viking funeral."<sup>57</sup> He was beyond hope of being martyred, so he no longer needed the people. Of course, this masque was published in 1941, before the war took its final direction with the entrance of the United States; nevertheless, regardless of historical dates and records, Jeffers' sympathies, as he has said, will remain with radicalism. From

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this view it is interesting to consider what George Santayana has to say about a poet in relation to religion and politics. This reference is not used to sanction Jeffers' position, but merely to give another side to the issue. Santayana asks what a poet can "have in common with religious faction or with a sentimental faith in liberty and democracy? Such a free mind might really have understood the ancients, and might have passed grandly with them into a complete naturalism, universal and impartial on its intellectual side (since intellect is by right all-seeing) but in politics and morals fiercely determinate, with an animal and patriotic intensity of will, like Carthage and Sparta, and like the Soviets and the Fascists of to-day."<sup>58</sup> Needless to say, every man, poet, professional, or laborer, leaves an impression on others through his views, and when they are as radical as Jeffers', they find indignant rebuttal from many, while others argue for the poet only on the basis of his literary achievement. Jeffers, although he never apologizes for his political attitudes, believing in his right of opinion, does apologize for his concern with temporary matters<sup>59</sup> which he considers to be a detriment to the artistic performance. Yet he is far from content to be silent even though he admonishes himself:

Why should an old stone pick at the future?  
Stand on your shore, old stone, be still while the  
Sea-wind salts your head white.<sup>60</sup>

It is significant that he identifies himself with the stone, the symbol of calm disinterestedness, when he cautions himself to be silent. He regards the display of emotion with as much disfavor as

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the nineteenth century romantics would have regarded stoicism, and in one of his poems he warns a young artist to avoid the early Keatsian attitude, "So that the color of a leaf can make you tremble. . . . I tell you unconsciousness is the treasure, the tower, the fortress."<sup>61</sup> It is a safeguard against hurts for the over-sensitive. If one is without feeling for a cause, he will not be affected by its outcome. That is why this conflict becomes a major one. How can Jeffers who preaches detachment become so involved?

And how can Jeffers who repeatedly depreciates prophets deny that he is one?

Men will fight through to the autumn flowering and  
ordered prosperity. They will lift their heads in the  
great cities

Of the empire and say: "Freedom? Freedom was a  
fire. We are well quit of freedom, we have found  
prosperity."

They will say, "Where now are the evil prophets?"  
Thus for a time in the age's afterglow, the sterile  
time;

But the wounds drain, and freedom has died, slowly  
the machines break down, slowly the wilderness  
returns.<sup>62</sup>

In prose Jeffers emphasizes he is not a prophet: "Is it necessary to add that I am not speaking as one of the prophets?"<sup>63</sup> But Jeffers does speak as a prophet, forecasting the decline of the age, predicting a Third World War and the destruction of mankind. He speaks in mystic metaphor, "we feel the future through the strained fabric."<sup>64</sup> Because he believes in the accurateness of the scientific principles that underline his philosophy, he cannot see a similarity between his religion and the delusions of another, and will not consider his words

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comparable to the passionate outbursts of prophets. R. J. Watts thinks that Jeffers, prophesying through his characters, may, if he chooses, deny many of the prophecies as his own.<sup>65</sup> This point of view may be partially true, but in many of the short poems, Jeffers speaks out in true prophetic fashion without hiding behind any character. In one of them he writes one of the reasons for which we have been searching in this section: why he is motivated by a desire to write for this time and these people. He speaks of his intention being similar to that of Lucretius and Plato:

Our own time, much greater and far less fortunate,  
Has acids for honey, and for fine dreams  
The immense vulgarities of misapplied science and  
decaying Christianity: therefore one christens each  
poem, in dutiful  
Hope of burning off at least the top layer of the time's  
uncleanness, from the acid-bottles.<sup>66</sup>

From this poem it would seem that Jeffers has sacrificed his theory of detachment for the cause of humanity, or more probably, for the age. But he has said that the age is on the decline and "the new start" is the thing to be hoped for. If this is so, we ask ourselves why Jeffers, the poet who sees beauty in violence, speaks out against war. Surely war would bring "the new start" quickly with inevitable physical and moral destruction. These speculations about these conflicting views will not be resolved here, or elsewhere, in this essay. They have not been resolved, and perhaps intentionally, by the poet. Whatever purpose they are meant to serve, or neglect to serve, they mainly cause decentralization in the doctrine and weaken our understanding of the poet's own prevailing view.

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At the same time they soften the absoluteness of inhumanism so that there is evidence of an alignment with man.

### *Fatalism and Free Will*

Another conflict that makes itself felt in reading Jeffers' poetry is the one between materialistic determinism and the free will of an individual. Being a storyteller, the poet has an excellent way to explore the source and the outcomes of these conflicts through the lives of his characters. His readers have no peremptory way of interpreting Jeffers' thinking about the matter except through the implied favor that he extends to the character. Do we feel sanction or disapproval? The reader's sensitivity to the author's tone is one method for elucidation of the question: does Jeffers believe in man's ability to determine his life, or does he believe it is a useless struggle, predetermined by man's nature and inheritance? Does he believe in the value of striving against fate to sustain life in the face of odds, or does he believe in submitting oneself to any situation without refusal, even into the hands of death? If he contends that death, the "gift,"<sup>67</sup> is the most perfect state man can attain, his regard for the character seeking it will be notable. If he alleges that life is worth living, he will express admiration for the character trying to preserve life. In almost every narrative there are characters representing an active love for preserving life, or a passive wish to depreciate and destroy it. When the term "passive" is used, it will refer to those who either desire death, or who yield to fate without contesting it. When "active" is used, it



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will include those who either have a deep love for life or will actively exert energies to avert fate. And here it ought to be said that Jeffers' characters are easily categorized, because they seem to represent a controlling attitude or symbolic passion rather than the many-faceted personalities of ordinary people. They are like the characters in Balzac's novels, driven to destruction by their monomanias. In the Greek theater the actors wore masks to establish their dominating trait in the audience's mind, as well as to distinguish themselves from the common people by making themselves significantly unreal.<sup>68</sup> But, unlike the Greeks, who molded their characters on heroic lines and elevated them above the masses through position and nobility, Jeffers' characters are a strange breed equipped primarily with fierce emotion they cannot or will not subjugate. This is especially true of his women.

Madrone Bothwell, of all Jeffers' characters, is the one whose active rebellion against fate seems most approved by him. Disgusted with her husband, whose city-bred manners and compliance to convention inspire her contempt, Madrone returns to the magnificence of the California hills with her two children. Having committed adultery, she has been commanded by the court to give up custody of the children to her husband. To prevent this, she kills them. Here is a woman modeled on the emotional scale of Medea, only her action is not for revenge; it is for the love of her children whom she cannot allow to be devoured by the city. "Madrone's will, 'free will' if we wish to call it, breaks through social systems and conventions.

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Her will which dates from prehistoric times cannot see her children, the next generation, in the robot-like existence of a totalitarian state."<sup>69</sup> Jeffers, by picturing Madrone as a chiaroscuro, forewarns us that there will be no compromise in such a person: "Madrone/ Bothwell's white eyes and straight black hair,"<sup>70</sup> "The black mane loose on her great white shoulders,"<sup>71</sup> "Her face like a white star."<sup>72</sup> The intensity in contrasts brings her sharply into focus through the narrative to the final lines in which Jeffers, the storyteller, pays her tribute:

I cannot tell; I think she had too much energy  
to die. I think that a fierce unsubdued core  
Lives in the high rock in the heart of the continent,  
affronting the bounties of civilization and Christ,  
Troublesome, contemptuous, archaic,  
with thunder-storm hair and  
snowline eyes, *waiting*,  
Where the tall Rockies pasture with their heads  
down, white-spotted and streaked  
like piebald horses, sharp withers  
And thunder-scarred shoulders against the sky,  
standing with their heads down,  
the snow-manes blow in the wind;  
But they will lift their heads and whinny  
when the riders come, they will stamp  
With their hooves and shake down the glaciers.<sup>73</sup>

Still indignantly rebelling against "the bounties of civilization," Madrone is made one with her god. Through the strong, triumphant tone of the writing, we cannot help but feel Jeffers' admiration for her whose dynamic energy is so vital that even death does not end its potential.

Another long passage from "Solstice" deserves to be quoted for its bearing upon Jeffers' concep-



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tion of the inevitability of fate. Madrone, in her madness to prevent her husband's taking the children back to the city, throws away the ignition key to the car. She throws it far down the hill, and:

That moment  
the magnificence and fire of the sun at setting  
Found the one single flaw in the planetary cloud,  
for which it had been sounding  
with golden plummets  
All day in vain. A fountain of intense light  
Poured on the ocean and sprayed and scattered;  
but now too late for gold, redder  
than blood, great waves  
Of blood-color light, that stained the sea  
they came from, and treacherously  
From below stabbed the cloud, dyeing its unguarded  
belly with fiery blood, and beat the sea-wall  
Mountain so that it rang like a gong  
Resounding with sanguine light. Every rock,  
leaf and stone, each grain of earth,  
each blade of dead grass,  
Each pool and course of water, each horn of the herd,  
bird in the air, deer on the hill; each eye,  
Each hair,  
Caught light and lived in it, distinct and particular  
and perfect, and fiery red. The ignition key,  
that toothed slip  
Of tarnished metal down the mountain sea-face,  
Shined like a star, a red one, among the spikes  
of black grass beside the wild  
buckwheat bush; nobody  
Not blind could fail.<sup>74</sup>

Nature and fate conspire together so that the needle in the haystack is found, forcing Madrone's murderous act. This kind of fatality shadows almost all of Jeffers' characters and the situations he or they create. From the twofold use of a psychological fate from Renaissance drama and an abstract fate from the Greek, "one wonders how

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much 'fate' human nature can tolerate."<sup>75</sup> The character Jeffers calls the Inhumanist also expresses his idea of the supremacy of destiny:

Birds have their fates like  
men and this one  
Destined from the egg to die in a human house—as the  
last Czar in a cellar, or Goering the luxurious  
On a cast-iron jail-cot—had met its appointment.<sup>76</sup>

Fate is the yoke under which many kneel, but Fayne Fraser does her best to thwart it. Fayne, like Madrone, distrusts man. Her expression, "Oh, give your heart to the hawks for a snack o' meat/ But not to men,"<sup>77</sup> is repeated over and over as she tries to give her husband strength to bear the guilt of murdering his brother without confessing it publicly and receiving the punishment for which he longs. Her unbelievable struggle to preserve her husband's sanity and his life is a losing battle, for, as the final act of self-immolation, he flings himself from the rock-ledge. But this negative note is not the ultimate one with which Jeffers leaves us, as in many of the narratives:

She climbed slowly down,  
Rock to rock, bush to bush. At length she could see  
him  
Lying softly, and there was somebody bending above  
him,  
Who was gone in a moment. It was not so dreadful  
As she had feared; she kissed the stained mouth,  
And brought smooth stones from the shore until she  
had covered  
Her love against the vultures and salty gulls;  
Then climbed up, rock to rock, bush to bush.<sup>78</sup>

Although Fayne's active strength sustains her and she emerges untouched, a note of irony creeps in. Through the association of "vultures" with

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"hawks," we are not certain that this character can abide by her slogan, for she covers her husband's body to prevent its serving as a "snack o' meat."

Hoult Gore also represents an intensity for living that acclaims the life forces. Having been killed on an island in the Pacific, he returns, a mutilated, decaying, living corpse, to wreak his vengeance upon his father, a shouting patriot who babbles about the honor of war, and to see his mother, whose shining perfection for Hoult has now been tarnished by adultery. Raked from the grave by "the dirty lies,/ Warpeddler's lies and the people's imbicility,"<sup>79</sup> and disillusioned by what he finds at home, he cries out:

"—I am the only dead body  
that has had the energy to get up again  
Since Jesus Christ. His whip was love, they say.  
Mine"—  
He followed her in through the door—"fury."<sup>80</sup>

Such affirmations on the side of the active character are countered by passive ones: Fera Martial, whose failure was "the very soul of my soul,"<sup>81</sup> bringing catastrophe upon the Cawdor family; Clare Walker, sacrificing herself for the whims of others; Cassandra, "a counter of sunrises, permitted to live because I am crying to die";<sup>82</sup> Alcmena Hungerfield, cursing the night her son defeated Death who had come to claim her. They all seem to cry for "The calm mother, the quietness of the womb and the egg,/ The primal and the latter silences."<sup>83</sup> They appear to be determined from the beginning by their passive natures, abandoning themselves to a predestined arrangement that will end in the peace of death.

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The question of free will being a possibility has long been debated. Freud thought it was a question beyond psychoanalysis, but hinted that there might be a chance of freedom of choice and behavior when reason and love prevail over the unconscious.<sup>84</sup> Jeffers is undoubtedly concerned with the problem of determinism, having been influenced by at least three sources: the Greek fate, Presbyterian predestination, and scientific determinism.<sup>85</sup> To what extent he has been influenced, the writers disagree. H. H. Waggoner thinks that science, cosmology, physiology, and psychology, attesting to man's determinism, has completely influenced Jeffers.<sup>86</sup> Therefore, the poet does not grant his characters any freedom of choice. Squires<sup>87</sup> and Morris<sup>88</sup> agree that Jeffers believes man's will remains free, regardless of the restrictions upon his physical make-up and his circumstances. These opposing views are echoed in "The Cretan Woman."

### *Phaedra*

I have been patient,

Hippolytus.

I think we must bear our fates, and accept  
What the gods send. They send sickness or health,  
evil or good, passionate longing  
Or the power to resist it. We have to do  
What the gods choose.

### *Hippolytus*

Not entirely, Phaedra.

We have to *suffer* what they choose: but we control  
our own will and acts  
For good or evil.<sup>89</sup>

With whom Jeffers agrees, it is hard to say, since Phaedra is driven unmercifully by Aphrodite, cool and amused by her little game, and Hippolytus

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is guided not only by his honor, but also by an incapacity to act. But it is Aphrodite who has the last word, and the last words seem to serve as a warning to all those who believe that they are secure in themselves, scoffing at the control of fate: "Let them beware. Something is lurking hidden./ There is always a knife in the flowers. There is always a lion just beyond the firelight."<sup>90</sup>



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## THE POET-PHILOSOPHER

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### THE POET SPEAKS

Other than some early reviews of poetry by friends to whom he felt indebted for their discovery and admiration of him, Robinson Jeffers has written little critical work. But he has attempted in one particular essay, in personal letters, and in the notes and forewords to his own volumes, to explain what he believes is the function of poetry in general and how his efforts have been focused. Here it might be pertinent to let the poet speak for himself so that we may understand his concepts of artistic responsibility. These concepts may help us to know something of Jeffers' methods of writing and how they contribute to the artistic projection of the doctrine.

A few years ago he wrote an article whose thesis is: "Great poetry is pointed at the future."<sup>1</sup> In it Jeffers offers some of the requirements necessary for the survival of poetry. From the essay it becomes obvious that there is an immediate relationship between these principles and Jeffers' poetry. Either the principles derive from his work, or his work is a direct outgrowth of these principles, conceived and effected early in his creative life. They embody three main points: permanence, the avoidance of epoch confusions, and an insistence

upon the nobility of poetry. Permanence, Jeffers believes, should apply to the subject matter of poetry, to nature's immutability and to man's never-changing emotions. "Permanent things, or things forever renewed, like the grass and human passions, are the material for poetry; whoever speaks across the gap of a thousand years will understand that he has to speak of permanent things, and rather clearly, too, or who would hear him?"<sup>2</sup>

"Rather clearly, too," leads us into the second consideration, which has to do with breaking away "from the directions that are fashionable in contemporary poetic literature."<sup>3</sup> Jeffers cites the Spanish poet, Gongora, who was a rage in sixteenth and seventeenth century Spain, who "invented a strange poetic idiom, a jargon of dislocated construction and far-fetched metaphors, self-conscious singularity, studious obscurity,"<sup>4</sup> and who was dependent upon a few initiates for appreciation. With Gongora as an example from the past, we feel the strong analogy Jeffers makes with the present school of obscurantists who have refined their poetry to the exclusion of impatient readers. Years before this, Jeffers had expressed a similar opinion about poetry which he believed "was becoming slight and fantastic, abstract, unreal, eccentric; and was not even saving its soul, for these are generally anti-poetic qualities. It must reclaim substance and sense, and physical and psychological reality."<sup>5</sup> Of course, Jeffers' apparent reaction to this school of writing becomes manifest in his own solution: his poetry is direct and natural, a method he has always used for clear expression, however many interpretations may be placed upon the philosophical content.



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The last requirement for the great poet, or future poet, to follow is somewhat confusing since in one instance we find Jeffers relying on the story for its own virtue and in another, dismissing the story as incidental and relying upon the nobility of the poetry alone. Jeffers' first view follows:

Besides one's duty to tell the truth and one's duty to shame the devil, it seems to me there is a third moral principle for story tellers. The story that heaps emotions or complexities and makes no thoroughfare is a weakening story and so I should think an immoral story; but the story that through whatever passes attains significant release will influence its readers in the same sense, and this is good for him, it is moral. It is a "happy ending," for something happens, whether marriage or escape or sudden death, a lysis, a freeing of some sort; and a settlement, an adjusted balance.<sup>6</sup>

In *The New York Times* article he takes a different point of view when he says, "Tragedy has been regarded, ever since Aristotle, as a moral agent, a purifier of the mind and emotions. But the story of *Medea* is about a criminal adventurer and his gun-moll; it is no more moral than the story of Frankie and Johnnie; only more ferocious."<sup>7</sup> Further on he calls the *Agamemnon* series and *Oedipus Rex* "primitive horror stories" made noble by the poetry, "the poetry and the beautiful shapes of the plays, and the extreme violence born of extreme passion."<sup>8</sup> It is hard to reconcile these two views and to deduce the proper emphasis Jeffers places upon the story, itself. Perhaps when he says, "the story that through whatever passes attains significant release," he means that the poetic response, itself, emanating from the moving energy, or noble language, could render the *donné* trifling. But this speculation could be clarified best by the author.

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Jeffers' purpose in writing is another seeming contradiction. In a letter to F. I. Carpenter in 1933 Jeffers wrote, "I think it is the business of a writer of poetry not to express his own gospel, but to present images, emotions, ideas, and let the reader find his good in them if he can. Not to form a way of thought, but perhaps to activate thoughts."<sup>9</sup> Such a statement comes as a surprise to a Jeffers' reader who is accustomed to being admonished and entreated to believe as the poet does or to perish in a sea of mythical illusions. Here is evidence of persuasion:

But while he lives let each man make his health in his  
mind, to love the coast opposite humanity  
And so be freed of love, laying it like bread on the  
waters; it is worst turned inward, it is best shot  
farthest.<sup>10</sup>

And here is hope that he will be heard and heeded:

But I have told you—  
However I suppose that few in the world have energy  
to hear effectively—  
Have paid my birth dues; am quits with the people.<sup>11</sup>

These strongly urgent plans are suggestive of a doctrine so deeply-rooted that the poet is compelled to direct it to the attention of others in an earnest desire to convince them. There is another desire any serious poet has: the hope that his work will succeed to a place of permanence among the world's literature, and especially Jeffers, who has written continually about the elements which would contribute to insuring permanence. Yet, convinced of the necessity of subject matter impervious to time, he makes a public apology for concerning himself with the fleeting subject of the

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Second World War. In a note to *Be Angry at the Sun*, published in 1941, just seven years previous to his essay on the survival of poetry, he writes, "I wish also to lament the obsession with contemporary history that pins many of these pieces to the calendar, like butterflies to cardboard. Poetry is not private monologue, but I think it is not public speech either; and in general it is worse for being timely."

From these varying attitudes it seems that Jeffers, the poet, expresses artistic contradictions comparable to those of Jeffers, the philosopher. But he does make clear his desire to write of permanent things in a natural, easily understood language that will present no barrier to future readers. We shall see how he does this, especially through images, emotions, and a unique style.

### PERMANENT IMAGES

Permanent things are what is needed in a poem, things  
temporally

Of great dimension, things continually renewed or  
always present.

Grass that is made each year equals the mountains in  
her past and future;

Fashionable and momentary things we need not see  
nor speak of.<sup>12</sup>

In "Point Joe" Jeffers says in poetry exactly what he has said at various times in prose. His feeling for permanence applies not only to the unspoiled, natural world, opposed to man-made cities, but also to the abiding interest of his subject matter, the emotional relationships of his characters.

The poet has used a relatively small piece of California coastal area to project his feeling for permanence. He has made this region as much his

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own as Wolfe made Altamont or Faulkner made the mythical Yoknapatawpha country theirs; only the land of the Carmel coast and Big Sur is a raging, turbulent land. It is where Jeffers came to live with his young wife, Una Call Kuster, in 1914. Being struck with its wild beauty and isolation, they settled there among the timbered hills that sweep down to the Pacific. Out of the sea granite worn smooth by the ocean-poundings the poet cut stones for his house and hauled them to their place among the cypress trees. He wandered and rode over places called Mal Paso Canyon, Point Sur, Pico Blanco Mountain, the Ventana Mountains, and Vicente Springs, romantic Spanish names for the region's landmarks. He drew inspiration from the "two-hundred-foot redwoods" that "look like the pile on a Turkish carpet,"<sup>13</sup> from the madrone trees, the wild buckwheat, yucca plants, the lupin, and maiden-hair ferns. One does not wonder that this land, shaken by earthquakes, dipped in thick fogs, ravaged with fires in the dry season, lashed with storms and raging surf, produced deep reverence in Jeffers. Here was a country relatively untouched by civilization, so overwhelming in its scope and majesty that it became synonymous with origins and eternal. It spoke to him as a presence and ultimately, as The Presence, and around it he fashioned his religion. Carried away by the mysticism of nature, Jeffers even appropriates the passions of life and perception to this land:

This pallid comet announces more than kings' deaths.  
To tail it with purer color I add  
That the mountains are alive. They crouch like great  
cats watching

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Our comic and mouse-hole tragedies, or lift high over  
them  
Peaks like sacred torches, pale-flaming rock.  
The old blue dragon breathes at their feet, the eternal  
flames  
Burn in the sky.<sup>14</sup>

The mountains not only possess sensibility, they symbolize the holiness of a pagan temple with its flaming torches to keep at bay the evil "dragon," the metaphor Jeffers uses here for "ocean." This same idea of personified nature watching short-lived man as he scampers over the earth, producing more misery than happiness, is further developed in "The Inquisitors," the last poem in *The Double Axe*. In it the mountains walk, talk, and split men and women apart, trying to discover how such an insignificant, unendurable creature could have produced such destruction with the atom. The poet is forever conscious of the greatness and permanence of nature and animates its vitality with such images as: the "south wind whetting his knife,"<sup>15</sup> "the leopard-footed evening,"<sup>16</sup> "the light-spun manes of the waves,"<sup>17</sup> the distant rainfall "Like mourning women veiled to the feet."<sup>18</sup> When man no longer surpasses nature through his capacity for thinking and acting, then his irrelevance becomes even more pronounced.

For anyone who has lived as intimately with nature as has Jeffers, it would be impossible not to react overtly to the devastation that is wrought upon the land and on its life. Violence pervades the images in his poetry, not only the violence of the elements and the barbarities of birds and animals, but also the brutality of sex, madness, and

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suicide. Jeffers criticizes his concentration on violence in a conversation with himself: "It is certain you have loved the beauty of storm disproportionately."<sup>19</sup> But he vindicates his attitude in the next lines:

But the present time is not pastoral, but founded  
On violence, pointed for more massive violence: per-  
haps it is not  
Perversity but need that perceives the storm-beauty.<sup>20</sup>

"Storm-beauty" is a key word in understanding Jeffers' conception of violence to which he attributes worth and esthetic qualities. While this obsession with violence has been termed "unrelieved sadism of . . . imagery, no matter what is being described,"<sup>21</sup> Jeffers does not use it for a terminal purpose. In it he sees a value for producing good:

What but the wolf's tooth whittled so fine  
The fleet limbs of the antelope?  
What but fear winged the birds, and hunger  
Jeweled with such eyes the great goshawk's head?  
Violence has been the sire of all the world's values.<sup>22</sup>

We can expect this observation from Jeffers' realist eyes which are immersed in worship of the fundamental design of nature, whose pain, "fear," and "hunger," whittle, wing, and jewel (verbs of imaginative action) until the object becomes more desirable. From these lines we see that the poet uses violence as a purging agent. If it destroys the weak, a good may possibly result; if it leaches without destroying, its object will be left more fit for survival.

The violence of fire occupies many of the narratives and short poems. Like the other violences, it performs positively. Jeffers treats it somewhat



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similarly to the Persians steeped in Zoroastrianism, who think of it as a means of purification, a holy object. The fire in "Tamar" comes to cleanse the incestuous house of Cauldwell which must be exterminated because of its generations of sinning. But it does not strike like a monster; it comes as a lover to claim his bride. Old Jinny, the idiot, who is responsible for starting it,

... dropped herself into the arms of the fire,  
Huddling under the sill, and her spirit unprisoned  
Filled all the room and felt a nuptial joy  
In mixing with the bright and eager flame.<sup>23</sup>

Also the fires in "Hungerfield" and "The Love and the Hate" offer their cleansing powers to characters who must be punished for their guilt here on earth, since Jeffers does not grant them an after-life in which punishment can continue.<sup>24</sup> Fire belongs to the poet's country because of its long dry season from early Spring to November or December. Not only are brush fires common, but before the rainy season begins farmers burn off the tall, dead grasses to make way for the tender blades. Fire is a constant danger to the ranchers. "Fire on the Hills" gives us a picture of what the poet considers beautiful about fire:

Beauty is not always lovely; the fire was beautiful,  
the terror  
Of the deer was beautiful; and when I returned  
Down the black slopes after the fire had gone by,  
an eagle  
Was perched on the jab of a burnt pine,  
Insolent and gorged, cloaked in the folded storms of  
his shoulders.  
He had come from far for the good hunting  
With fire for his beater to drive the game; the sky was  
merciless

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Blue, and the hills merciless black,  
The sombre-feathered great bird sleepily merciless  
    between them.  
I thought, painfully, but the whole wind,  
The destruction that brings an eagle from heaven is  
better than mercy.<sup>25</sup>

Such a grotesque silhouette against blue-black desolation pushes many readers close to revulsion. Without any preparation for his final, personal comment, Jeffers defends the destruction and cruelty of nature in a terse last line. Many readers may be reluctant to accept Jeffers' idea of beauty and justice in the natural order because the poem has not adequately prepared them for the conclusion; but perhaps this is an instance in which Jeffers is trying to "activate thoughts" rather than to convince.

The poet, ever-conscious of the relationship of this earth and man to the universe, makes use of cosmic images that flicker through much of the poetry. One of Jeffers' discoverers writes, "That his musings are cosmic in their outlook, rather than concerned, as is the present fashion, with the miserable minutiae of human emotions and conduct, is to me cause for rejoicing."<sup>26</sup> Jeffers' interest in science is probably partly responsible, but undoubtedly the vastness of his country also influenced him. To compare oneself with two-hundred foot redwoods, the almost limitless expanse of the Pacific, the age-old granite, is to look even farther for an estimate of self, as far as the eye and the telescope can see: to the heavens and their whirling planets. Jeffers places one of his characters in the position of standing in space, viewing the world from a point outside the solar system. It



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is Bruce Ferguson who momentarily escapes beyond the earth's limits:

He found himself for a lightning moment  
Outside the flux and whirl of things, observing the  
world

From a fixed point. He saw the small spinning planet,  
Spotted with white at the poles and dull red wars  
Branding both cheeks, and the sun and the other stars  
like herds of wild horses

On the vast field, but all vanished with the lightning  
Before he had time to think of it . . .<sup>27</sup>

These passages dealing with the cosmic forces sometimes echo the incantations that primitive poetry used in order to master something the mind did not understand or know:

“ . . . It is strange, truly,  
That great and small, the atoms of a grain of sand and  
the suns with planets, and all the galactic universes  
Are organized on one pattern, the eternal roundabout,  
the heavy nucleus and whirling electrons, the  
leashed

And panting runners going nowhere; frustrated flight,  
unrelieved strain, endless return-all-all-  
The eternal fire-wheel.”<sup>28</sup>

Through the use of kenning in “return-all-all” and “fire-wheel” the poet produces a kind of supernatural awe that overpowers the scientific words, and we, seeing the flashing, spinning brightness, are brought under the same spell that dazzles the poet.

In the above poetic treatment of kinetics we notice the emphasis on eternal change. Jeffers uses this theory together with his concept of an omni-secular god to convey what may or may not be called mysticism. What in the nineteenth century would have been mysticism may now possibly be

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based on Jung's explanation of the primal forces which are accountable for man's urgent drives. While Freud attributes many of these drives to sexual energies and Adler defines them as evolving from inferiority and a striving for power, Jung asks us "to go back to prehistory to examine a collective unconscious."<sup>29</sup> Here is similar thinking between psychoanalyst and poet, but Jeffers goes farther back than prehistory:

The tides are in our veins, we still mirror the stars,  
life is your child, but there is in me  
Older and harder than life and more impartial, the eye  
that watched before there was an ocean.<sup>30</sup>

The poet, looking back billions of years to the creation of the solar system, may be seeking for aspects of our make-up in primordial energies which are still at work in man. If all things return to a source and the source in return gives birth to life, then humanity mirrors the flux and properties of the cosmic system. Man is unimportant in himself; nevertheless he is an atom and a link in the chain. This atom-sized creature is constantly seen in reference to time which diminishes him, to space which dwarfs him, to symbols of natural purity which, by comparison, render him contaminated. The images against which Jeffers contrasts humanity are of such proportion, such duration, such beauty or violence that man is powerless to compete, especially when he is denied the unique, human qualities which have brought him forward in glorious accomplishment.

From this pin-point on our world's map, Jeffers draws substance for poetic and philosophic expression, from both the nature of the California

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coast-hills and the spatial realms above them. They supply a realistic setting for his works which have for their basis the only material permanence this world knows. Such permanence, rooted in natural life and cosmic sweep, is related to the primitivism of his characters and their way of living.

## PRIMITIVE EMOTIONS

In the Foreword to Lawrence Clark Powell's book, Jeffers suggests the reasons for his own subject matter by discussing the problem of subject from the point of view of poets in general:

Most often he [the poet] chooses a tragic story, because pain, being more intense than pleasure, produces stronger emotions. The story may deal with war, like the *Iliad*, or religion, like the *Divine Comedy*; but in times of high civilization war becomes too specialized and inhuman, and religion too vague or incredible, for poetry to fix its roots in. Other sources of emotion must be tapped; and when poetry has remained vigorous in civilized times, the poets have turned with singular unanimity to one source in particular, to the family and its relationships. . . . These relationships are always unhappy and often vicious, not because the poets prefer vice and sorrow, but because happiness makes no story, and but calm emotion.<sup>31</sup>

This observation establishes the foundation for all the narratives that the poet has written. In only one instance is the family and its emotional relationships usurped by any other theme. This is the story of "The Inhumanist," a man without family or friends until a dog and a young girl join him. A family conflict, however, does contribute to the sub-plot. In "The Loving Shepherdess," although

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Clare Walker is without family, except for her sheep, her present situation is the outgrowth of a family quarrel. Thus, like the Greeks and the Elizabethans, Jeffers utilizes family antagonisms to examine man.

Paralleling the primitive setting against which the poet stages his narratives, his people, too, are primitive. They are ranchers living in isolated spots that dot the California country. They ride horses (occasionally a car is used); they are self-sustaining by working their land; they distrust the city that symbolizes the corruption of massed humanity. Brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers, husbands, wives, and grandparents live under one roof. It is small wonder that collisions of temperament and psychological drives follow. Rudolph Gilbert supports part of this idea when he says, "We find the protagonists usually lonely, isolated, sometimes childless individuals, for whom family ties seem to count little."<sup>32</sup> It is difficult to agree with the last point, that family ties count for little, because it is significant that in many narratives, in the attic-room beneath the eaves of the house lies a sick old parent who is cared for with filial love. These people are solicitous of their old invalids, as we see in *The Women at Point Sur*. Old Morhead, paralyzed from the chest down, is given not only respect but patient attention. In "Cawdor" Martial's daughter, Fera, is almost fanatic in her devotion to her blind and disfigured father, even marrying unwisely to give him a home. Old Jinny, the idiot in "Tamar," is not mistreated by any member of the Cauldwell household. Lance Fraser's mother, an angina victim, receives tender care from her young daughter-in-law. So the re-

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sponsibility of family ties, or at least of humane treatment toward an incapacitated member, is evident through much of the poetry.

This concentration upon sickness is not unnatural if the poet is being realistic in his treatment of family life. But morbidity does arise from the manner of sickness; usually it is an affliction like cancer, insanity, or paralysis, without hope of recovery, that adds further stress upon the emotional lever. Such stress is always at the core of the narratives. The poet considers this strain part of the "ordinary/ Elements of common life":<sup>33</sup>

Out of these, Lord—

A cancerous old man, a jealous  
Wife nightlong reciting  
Her litany of ancient wrongs,  
And a little young hot adulteress  
Between her two men—out of these ordinary  
Elements of common life, those two or three persons  
Who not without cause question it,  
Can any discovery shine, or a hawk rise?<sup>34</sup>

If we make an analogy between the pathologist, whose concern is with dead tissues and dead bodies, and the psychoanalyst, who probes into the criminal, the perverted, and the abnormal, we find that they both are ultimately interested in maintaining what is vigorous and healthy.<sup>35</sup> Jeffers' last line in the above quotation, "Can any discovery shine, or a hawk rise?" makes us wonder if he, too, through literature, is engaged in discovering man's potential preeminence. And like the pathologist and psychoanalyst, he must look into the lower depths of humanity in order to wrench a virtue from the consuming power of the passions. Unlike them, the poet most frequently fails to dis-

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cover any inherent good. This impasse is the very motivation of inhumanism. If Jeffers had found sufficient value in man, he would not have been compelled to turn with such vehemence to nature.

Jeffers not only imposes a primitive country and a primitive way of living upon his characters, he also endows them with primitive emotions. "Jeffers's people . . . are pushed about by emotions which meet principally external restraints. Of reason, of will, there is nothing in any of these people."<sup>36</sup> If the emotion is hate, it will seek at all costs its release through destruction of the hated object; if it is love, that love must be satisfied without regard for consequence. These are instinctual emotions, basic to people beyond the ties of civilization. Since instinct is an innate quality in all animal life, we can feel certain that Jeffers will not deplore it. The Inhumanist comments on instinct as he watches *Sea-Gull* in the act of an embrace:

"Pretty, ah? It's even beautiful. Her name is  
Sea Gull.

She opens her little beak, she is gulping for love. She  
has no mind but an instinct. She will drop twins,  
The race will live, though civilization burns like a  
strawstack."<sup>37</sup>

Jeffers' emphasis on instinct would aid Mr. H. H. Waggoner in his remark that "most of Jeffers's characters seem to lack the 'super-ego.'"<sup>38</sup> This would coincide with the primitive make-up of these people since the super-ego is an outgrowth of civilized environment and institutional laws which eventually mold the adult individual's conscience. Yet this statement cannot be wholly true since so many of these characters commit suicide,



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the complete antithesis of the actions of a person without a super-ego:

Given a strong, violent, demanding, unyielding, harsh super-ego—which is as cruel and as ruthless as certain environments and people in it are, accepting no compromise and always demanding their pound of flesh—and this super-ego will dominate the individual and force him to do its bidding, which the individual will proceed obediently to do unwittingly, irrationally. Terrified, depressed, self-humiliated: no act of self-punishment may prove enough for this individual, unless it be self-inflicted capital punishment—which means suicide.<sup>39</sup>

Therefore it becomes obvious that Lance Fraser, Bruce Ferguson, Cawdor, and others, although motivated by instinctual emotions, are products of twentieth century civilization, because their suicides and self-inflicted agonies reflect their inability to live with guilt, the price the super-ego exacts.

From time to time Jeffers' readers are startled by the philosophy his characters speak. Even though they are uneducated, and often isolated from newspapers and radio, they have formed a code by which they achieve a sparse kind of philosophical wisdom. This code is not derived from superstition, which is native to many primitive peoples, or from Judeo-Christian ethics. It is more like the code of the forest where neither good nor evil is an issue, where only survival and the demands of the body matter. Even Howard Howren, who has returned from college in the city, is surprised at his mother's objectivity. Through his studies in high school, Howard has long realized that his sister is not his father's child, since she has brown eyes, an impossibility in the child of two



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blue-eyed parents. When he presses the question, Mrs. Howren denies his accusation, but then says:

"... Believe whatever you need to believe, dear.  
What's truth? Whatever helps us live and be strong  
Is the truth." He said "My God, mother, how modern  
Away off here in the mountain. Adultery's nothing,  
But this amazes me."<sup>40</sup>

Whether we agree with Howard that his mother is "modern," we will agree that it is amazing how clearly she defined her creed, and how closely it resembles Godwin's utilitarianism. This is the code of many of Jeffers' characters, an utter disregard for a system of ethics based on the commandments. Rugged individuals from a primitive land, they seem estranged from civilization's esteem for its members and from a spiritual need that seeks alliance with any supernatural divinity.

One last factor to be considered in Jeffers' concentration on primitivism is his constant reference to the female body. His women have frequent occasion to shed their clothes as they swim or rend them in their frenzies. But it must be noted that against the background of nature, their bodies blend harmoniously and serve to express the kinship for which Jeffers aims. California on her mare, Fayne Fraser and Tamar swimming in the ocean are embodiments of this alliance, as is Madrone Bothwell, boldly drawn against her beloved California hills. Her body is sculptured over heroic lines; it is one that will produce and survive through its strength. The grinding "r's" throughout the following lines help to give validity to Jeffers' simile of "engine."

She washed her lacerated  
Body and all the heavy cordage of her nightfall hair,  
and stood up steaming in the cold twilight,

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Long-legged, deep-ribbed, great-shouldered,  
nothing soft, not even the dark-eyed breasts;  
but like a great engine  
Built for hard passions and violent labor,  
and in the bone girdle of the hips  
to breed warriors.<sup>41</sup>

Because Jeffers always sees beauty in the "Earnest elements of nature,"<sup>42</sup> it is this kind of body he praises most, not the fragile, decorative woman who is indigenous to fine breeding and cultured societies. Such a woman is Fawn Ferguson, who is slight and small-hipped, and whose concern for herself is an indication of her inversion and narcissism:

... they were nearly as beautiful as a  
young panther  
With her soft cub: but Fawn a somewhat degenerate  
animal  
Craving love more than giving it had not been able  
To suckle her baby.<sup>43</sup>

Narcissistic tendencies are in almost all of his women. This is not unlikely in those whose only reason for living is love, and whose primitive passions rule out any other kind of life. They are, as Jeffers refers to Fawn, comparable to beautiful young creatures of nature who preen and sunbathe, who eat, sleep, and mate, and are completely content with their lives until something interferes. Then, like animals, they are ready to do battle.

This attention to permanence and primitivism in the narratives creates a dramatic setting which is a contrast to the subjective emphasis characteristic of many of the short poems. Jeffers' readers are nearly as certain of their way through his

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country as if they had lived there. They are just as sure about the people they will meet, fate-driven people whose single-barreled emotional apparatus will eventually destroy them. Far from conveying the atmosphere of the rural life of the pastoral, Jeffers' narratives are so intense in their "storm-beauty," "people like phantoms," and "passion so strained,"<sup>44</sup> that some readers may find the extravagances almost unbearable.

### THE DISTINGUISHING STYLE

#### *Influences*

Lawrence Clark Powell says that along with Jeffers' romantic tendencies, which include the supernatural, violence, horror, and prophecies, he "combines a power of irony and clear intellectual perception that may be termed classical. He is not the dupe of his romanticism."<sup>45</sup> Another writer, who is aligned with the humanists, and therefore opposed to Jeffers' philosophy, makes this comment, "The perversity of theme, however, is partly compensated by elevation of treatment, for Jeffers has a certain grandeur of style, drawing as he does upon Greek literature, the Bible, modern psychology, and physical science for thought, and the beauty of natural scenery for description."<sup>46</sup> If these sources have influenced the poet's style, then it might be said that the style is eclectic rather than singular. This is partly true; nevertheless, the final effect is unique because all these determinants merge into a distinct idiom, predominantly romantic.

Jeffers' close study of the Bible at an early age

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may be responsible for the effect it has had on his poetry. His simple metaphors taken from nature, his use of parallelism and alliteration, his dependence upon the rock and the sea for images and symbolism, the constant reference to animals to equal an abstraction all have Biblical affinities. "The Inhumanist" is surely grounded in Job. While Job struggles with his inability to understand, the Inhumanist struggles with his other self that is steeped in terror. Both are dazzled by their God's handiwork. It is in this poem that we find, "and the Lord answered him/ Out of the driving storm."<sup>47</sup> We cannot fail to see and hear the almost identical lines from the King James version, "Then Jehovah answered Job out of the whirlwind."<sup>48</sup> The whole poem has a Biblical effect in its mysterious revelations and in the Inhumanist who speaks in parables about a time (the nineteen forties) as troubled as Jeremiah's:

So they mocked him, and said,  
"What's your advice?" "Mine?" he said. "It is not new:  
all the rulers know it.  
If there's a flea in the water, swallow a toad. If you  
have trouble at home,  
Try foreign war."<sup>49</sup>

This concreteness is an essential trait of Biblical writing, devised to aid the expression of a people whose language lacked sufficient abstract words. For that reason, the Hebrews also used animals to describe an abstract condition, just as Jeffers does:

It is likely enough that lions and scorpions  
Guard the end; life never was bonded to be endurable  
nor the act of dying  
Unpainful . . .<sup>50</sup>

There is a hawk that is picking the birds out of our sky.

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She killed the pigeons of peace and security,  
She has taken honesty and confidence from nations  
and men,  
She is hunting the lonely heron of liberty.<sup>51</sup>

These last lines not only demonstrate the Biblical use of animals, but they are also examples of parallelism, in which a second and sometimes third line asserts the same thought in slightly different words. This emphasis through balanced repetend and anaphora is much used by the poet, creating urgency of truth and often admonitory instructions, just as it does in the Hebrew writings. Jeffers' poetry, like the Bible's, is filled with psalms to the beauties of nature, to the mountains and hills, the waters, the birds that fly, and the green abundance of the land. Its very nature, like that of the Hebrew writing, is pictorial.

Biblical writing is much more embellished than Greek. Greek poetry, treating the universal scene plus human values, is strange to us from the power of its simplicity, not its mystery. In some isolated instances we may find likenesses between Jeffers' and the Greek style when the language does not reflect a highly personal involvement, but this is rare, since the overall feeling of his poetry is romantic, the complete antithesis of the Greek style. A resemblance that is noticeable is in the directness of dialogue and action in a few of the narratives. These, in particular "Roan Stallion," "The Tower beyond Tragedy," and "The Cretan Woman," are not embellished. The characters quickly cut their course through the story without waste. This principle is Greek, and the result is classic in development. Greek literature, however, has been more influential on Jeffers from the point of

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story rather than expression, as seen by the plays that he has selected for re-working: Euripides' *Medea* for the modern stage version and probably for "Solstice"; *Hippolytus* for "The Cretan Woman"; and Aeschylus' *Oresteia* for "The Tower beyond Tragedy." Horace Gregory makes it emphatic that while many people assume that "some of Jeffers' dramatic poems—for they are poems rather than plays—are adaptations from the Greek [.] they are not. They are Jeffers' re-creations of ancient themes."<sup>52</sup> Even though a re-creation is bound to be influenced to some extent by the source, the influence is never enough to erase Jeffers' full-blown romanticism with its abundance of metaphor, richness of image, repetend, and pathetic fallacy:

We know that good and evil and virtue and sin—are  
words, tired words: but *love* is more beautiful than  
sunrise

Or the heart of a rose: the love of man and woman can  
be more beautiful than the great-throated nightin-  
gale

Her heartbreak song: when all the leaves of the trees  
hang still to hear it, and the stars in hushed heaven  
Hold their breath and lean lower.—Ours could be.  
*Our* love could be.<sup>53</sup>

Science has also been influential on the poet's style. Writing in 1932 H. H. Waggoner goes so far as to say that the influence of science dominates Jeffers' poetic technique.<sup>54</sup> The extent of the dominance may be disputable; however, there is a substantial inclination toward the language of science. Some of the most outstanding allusions to biology occur in "Such Counsels You Gave to Me" in which the protagonist, Howard Howren, is a



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young medical student, applying his new knowledge to every phase of activity in the human body. He is conscious of the workings of his body as he lies down to sleep:

Sleep deepened over him  
Like heavy ocean, more like coma than sleep; his mind  
made no appreciable dreams,  
But crawling blindly about his body like a numbed  
spider on its web of nerves, here it shook a filament,  
There a dark ganglion faintly glowed for a moment  
and returned to darkness, a pin-point nexus of  
braincells  
Grew phosphorescent and faded and faintly glowed  
again; little superfluities of meaningless chemistry;  
Besides the tidal glowing and paling, and the traffic-  
light rhythms  
Of nerves that govern breathing and heart-beat, ar-  
teries and viscera.<sup>55</sup>

The poet makes us see these nerves and their connections, glowing and darkening, like lights going on and off in a distant city, giving evidence of life. He has created the effect with such scientific words as "ganglion," "nerves," "heart-beat," "arteries," and "viscera." These words merge so harmoniously with the poetry that they relinquish a degree of their biological origins in the moment of reading. Jeffers often makes use of biological terms to describe the ravages of disease and the body from which life is being wrested:

At last the jerked hemp snapped the neck sideways  
And bruised the cable of nerves that threads the bone  
rings; the intolerably strained consciousness in a  
moment changed.  
It was strangely cut in two parts at the noose, the  
head's  
Consciousness from the body's; both were set free and  
flamed; the head's with flashing paradisaal light  
Like the wild birth of a star . . .<sup>56</sup>



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When the terror and realism are over-emphasized, a loss of beauty occurs, although it is not the language of science which contributes to the loss of beauty. It is the clinical intellect that peers objectively, without recoiling, at the workings of death. As if Jeffers is quite aware of the depths to which he has taken us, his poetic fancy counters with "paradisaal light/ Like the wild birth of a star," and we are quickly rescued from the vision of the technician.

Freud and his technical work in psychoanalysis, as mentioned earlier, have contributed to Jeffers' understanding of psychological problems. The whole of psychology is a motivation for the themes of the narratives as Jeffers tries to approach the unconscious or account for actions emanating from the id. Dreams permeate the poems. It is in these dreams that Jeffers makes frequent use of the symbols connected with psychoanalysis. While Jeffers makes no attempt to interpret the dreams, they are suggestive enough that the common reader can use them to formulate what is about to happen, or to apply their relevance to the understanding of a character. Bruce Ferguson, frustrated with the partial knowledge that his wife is an adulteress, and afraid he may be capable of murder, has this dream:

In his dream he felt a  
stench and decay of corpses everywhere,  
So that he refused to breathe, and watched along the  
reddish horizon of his dream twilight the huge  
Blade and tumor of a wave to come and wash clean. It  
came, it was not water but blood . . .<sup>57</sup>

It appears to most readers that Bruce Ferguson, hoping the wave of water will come to wash away

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his suspicions (the "stench and decay of corpses"), will not have his wish fulfilled. Instead, he sees his fear verified in the dream symbol of blood. Although other references to the conscious mind with Freudian overtones are scattered throughout the narratives, the main occupation is with dreams. These interludes produce both a modern and an ancient effect, one based soundly upon a new study of the mind, the other on the prophetic dreams that invade the ancient literatures; for instance, Babylonian and Hebrew. In using the Oedipus-complex theme in many of the narratives, Jeffers again draws on Freud who has explained when it is normal and when it is abnormal in the life of man. But this theme is an ancient one, too, having been used by Sophocles in *Oedipus Rex*, the king who fate decreed would marry his mother. These examples of how Jeffers draws from an outside source and applies it to his thought and expression concur with what he believes is necessary to great poetry: permanence of subject matter. This permanence is rooted in the past, yet modern in scientific sanction. And this poetry that embodies it reaches back into the past for words and ways of expression, as well as into the future.

### *Power Devices*

As a radio dial tunes in snatches of a symphony or sonata, the listener is often able to identify its composer by the cadences, by the classical, linear counterpoint, the rich harmonies, or the modern dissonances. So it is with a poet or a painter whose materials and methods of using them immediately designate the artist. It has been said of Jeffers that

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"one could pick, unerringly, a poem by him from a stack of thousands of others."<sup>58</sup> This statement can hardly be questioned, because Jeffers works his words into a distinctively individual style, which is certainly desirous to project his distinctively individual doctrine. We have seen how Jeffers employs bleak images and bleak subjects to underscore his philosophy; how he uses language also contributes to unifying the poetic effect. The poet, writing about his dissatisfaction with his first published book, says of *Tamar*, his third, "It seems to me that the verses were not merely negligible, like the old ones, but had some singularity, whether they were good or not."<sup>59</sup> *Tamar* was published in 1924. The poet's style has not deviated from the original pattern. He must still believe in the singularity he found then. It is a singularity grounded in a powerfully executed romanticism that urges us to hear, to heed, to remember.

Jeffers does not fascinate or cajole his readers into believing as he does; he implores them through the constant use of the imperative:

*Turn* outward, *love* things, not men, *turn* right away  
from humanity,  
*Let* that doll lie. *Consider* if you like how the lilies  
grow,  
*Lean* on the silent rock until you feel its divinity  
Make your veins cold, *look* at the silent stars, *let* your  
eyes  
Climb the great ladder out of the pit of yourself and  
man.<sup>60</sup>

Eight imperative verbs (the italics are this writer's) in five lines create great urgency, but also, perhaps, a feeling of the sermon. And we may, if we

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are not sufficiently enchanted, rise and walk away. Jeffers' stress on entreating his readers to believe as he does is especially noticeable in the ending lines of his short poems in which Jeffers is the speaker. If he foregoes the imperative, he may strengthen his doctrinal point by a terse three to six word summary: "It is better to be dust";<sup>61</sup> "It is better not to strike";<sup>62</sup> "Distance makes clean."<sup>63</sup> These brief ending lines tell us that there is no more to be said; the point has been made, and the issue is closed. If agreement from the reader is not a quick insight, the disagreement is apt to be violent, because, as we have seen in "Fire on the Hills," a resolution is often omitted. This rigidity encourages either flat acceptance or flat refusal of Jeffers' views.

Of all the devices the poet uses to achieve a powerful delivery of his message, repetition is the one most frequently employed. Through different types of repetition the poet effects a kind of urgent momentum. He also creates continuity and dramatic emphasis in the narratives. In "Roan Stallion" he sways us to behold the beauty of this magnificent horse:

Shaking the red-roan mane for a flag on the hills.<sup>64</sup>

.....  
...shaking the nightfall

Of the great mane...<sup>65</sup>

.....  
... the dark arched

neck shaking the nightfall

Of the great mane...<sup>66</sup>

We hear Fayne Fraser saying over and over, "Give your heart to the hawks," as she beseeches her husband to disdain man. We see Clare Walker's "pulse

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like a plucked harp-string jiggle in her throat,"<sup>67</sup> as we formerly had seen "her lean throat jiggle with its jet of blood/ Like a slack harp-string plucked."<sup>68</sup> These images, clad in romantic metaphor, symbolism, and simile, seem to have caught the poet's fancy; they also bear directly upon the intensity he creates through their repetition. As we have seen, the action in the narratives is often foreshadowed by dream symbolism which heightens interest. The constant reference to "eyes" in "Cawdor" (from the time Cawdor dreams of the bloody heifer until he blinds himself), is significant for the way this word and image build toward the climax, adumbrating the protagonist's final act. Certain other passages with mystical implications attain their strong structural positions through repetition and achieve a kind of independent cyclical movement that stands out from the rest of the poem. Jeffers makes certain through this treatment that such lines will be remembered:

Always the strain, the straining flesh, who feels what  
God feels  
Knows the straining flesh, the aching desires,  
The enormous water straining its bounds, the electric  
Strain in the cloud, the strain of the oil in the oil-tanks  
At Monterey, aching to burn, the strain of the spinning  
Demons that make an atom, straining to fly asunder,  
Straining to rest at the center,  
The strain in the skull, blind strains, force and counter-force,  
Nothing prevails . . .<sup>69</sup>

As intensity is the result of repetition, the desire to provoke seems to be responsible for Jeffers' use of the rhetorical question which gains quick entrance into a problem and, at the same time, anticipates our undivided attention. He sometimes

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poses the question at the beginning of a short poem to immediately attract his readers into seeking the answer:

Is it so hard for men to stand by themselves,  
They must hang on Marx or Christ, or mere Progress?<sup>70</sup>

Or he may end his poem with questions which act as a provocative summation:

What poet will be born to tell you to hate cruelty  
and filth? What prophet will warn you  
When the witch-doctors begin dancing, or if any man  
says "I am a priest," to kill them with spears?<sup>71</sup>

Regardless of the question's position in the poem, we are forced to stop and think, if only for a second, of what our answer would be. If there is serious difference with Jeffers' view, the question gives us an opportunity to disagree openly because we have been drawn so directly into the intellectual aspect of the problem, rather than having been convinced through an esthetic experience. Again the poet, through a wish to persuade, may lose our sympathetic response when he solicits sanction of his doctrinal arguments through rhetoric.

But Jeffers does not lose us through his treatment of dialogue, much of which is fast-paced. His speakers may be designated only by the renewal of quotation marks instead of "he said" and "she said." Since the characters, themselves, are usually verbally abrupt, meaning more than they say and speaking in terse sentences and phrases, this rapid dialogue accounts for some of the more concentrated lines in the narratives:

She went and said, "No."  
"It is clearing eastward?" "All dark. Some wind moves



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The sky-ridge trees." "Rain or not"; and after a moment, "Did you notice anything," he said, "Helen, disordered

In what I said lately?" "I know you suffer Overpowering pain at times." "Hm? Not a bit. Firm as a rock."<sup>72</sup>

From this example we see how dramatic in structure the narratives can become with inflection and meaning completely dependent on our own reading and interpretation. Of course, such conversation is reserved for the more casual moments. When the characters portray a highly emotional state, Jeffers has them speak in highly figurative language that gains power with added length:

"I wish that the air were sudden poison, and the sun Blind, and the black sea piled over the mountains. I wish the wind that roars on the shaking glass Were a sword in our throats."<sup>73</sup>

Or:

"... We'll make a bright eye up here for the night, in the high blackness, for the hollow night, For the ships to wonder what star... I'll tell you what star, You streaming ships..."<sup>74</sup>

Such extravagances with metaphor and repetition heighten the passionate outbursts of these people whose language is almost as graphic as the poet's own descriptions, and whose use of violent image is similar, too. Thus Jeffers sustains his power of expression throughout his characters' speeches, utilizing the same stylistic methods as in the narrative passages.

Other devices lend force to this writing. Inversion is one which the poet often employs: "shut



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are the shops, mousedark the houses.”<sup>75</sup> Here the position of the adjectives centers stress upon them. This is desirable since they are the words of greatest importance and would lose attention at the end of the phrases. The poet’s penchant for compounding words also gives energy to the poetry. “Fire-globe,”<sup>76</sup> “cloud-sky,”<sup>77</sup> and “ocean-far”<sup>78</sup> impart a directness and solidarity that “globe of fire” or “far over the ocean” could not. Jeffers’ choice of concrete verbs creates unexpected impact: “that fountains dirt.”<sup>79</sup> His handling of verbs is responsible for an acceleration within the line when he omits prepositions: “Dream the fierce joys,”<sup>80</sup> “turns iron again.”<sup>81</sup> All of these characteristic techniques contribute to the power for which Jeffers strives.

The power is built upon direct statement that rules out implication. What Jeffers means, he says. In fact, overstatement, through metaphor of hyperbolical character (as we have seen in the above quoted dialogues), is more frequently the case. This means that some of Jeffers’ intensity is gained through romanticized exaggeration. Radcliffe Squires says about the poet’s tendency toward hyperbole, “He has chosen to work with acid and a needle-pointed stylus; he has beset his lines with crude, angry ornament, has disguised his message and been willing to squander hundreds of lines in febrile hyperbole in order to justify the admonitory lines.”<sup>82</sup> We may fail to understand the poet’s reasons for squandering anything so precious as poetry even to justify a message, but we do understand why Jeffers has woven the message of inhumanism, a doctrine of heavy, harsh fabrication, into a heavy, direct, and powerful style.

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### *Rhythm*

The hardy rhythmic beat in Jeffers' poetry also heightens its power. This heavy, majestic prosody is achieved by a series of stresses which vary from line to line. Of this distinctive measure Jeffers writes, "I want it rhythmic and not rhymed, moulded more closely to the subject than older English poetry is, but as formed as alcaics if that were possible, too. . . . The rhythm comes from many sources—physics, biology, beat of blood, the tidal environments of life, desire for singing emphasis that prose does not have."<sup>83</sup> Yet this poetry seems to naturally grow out of prose so that there is no artificiality or falsifying of accent to generate a rhythm once begun. If there were such a thing as masculine and feminine rhythms, as there are rimes, Jeffers' would fit into the masculine category. His stresses are mighty and long-striding like a man plunging through forest brush, and rather unpredictable, according to the barriers that may prevent a steady foot-fall. Through these stresses that change considerably from line to line Jeffers expresses a rhythmic freedom that shows him to be a modern.<sup>84</sup>

Happy people die whole, they are all dissolved in a  
moment,

they have had what they wanted,

No hard gifts; the unhappy

Linger a space, but pain is a thing that is glad to be  
forgotten;

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but one who has given

His heart to a cause or a country . . .<sup>85</sup>

This example, varying its stress constantly between eight and three, is more regular in scansion pattern than many others that could have been used. But like all of his poetry, other than the first two books not considered in this essay, "The Coast-Range Christ," and a few minor poems, it is not rimed. The primitive, masculine beat that runs through the lines is commented upon by Jeffers in "Continent's End." The poet is addressing the ocean to which his rhythms have been likened:<sup>86</sup>

Mother, though my song's measure is like your surf-  
beat's ancient rhythm I never learned it of you.

Before there was any water there were tides of fire,  
both our tones flow from the older fountain.<sup>87</sup>

The poet, knowing that rhythm is at the base of all living, may be merely saying that his accentual prosody is a completely natural pattern, not an ingenious imitation of the rolling surf or the stallion's gallop. It is inherent in man's make-up and thus inevitable in his expression.

Jeffers' treatment of rhythm in the dialogues, as in all the poetry, is strong, but not precisely defined. This is notable in the following lines. (Notable, too, is the stressed euphonious "ay" sound contributing to the heavy lyric despair of Theseus and Phaedra.)

*Theseus*

(SHOUTING) Agh!—No.—What were you saying?

What did you say, Phaedra?

*Phaedra*

That my prayer was vain. He was like a beast,

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like a wild <sup>^</sup>beast.

(COLDLY) That is his nature.

*Theseus*

(DRAWING HIS SWORD) You dirty leavings.—

You say that my son Hippolytus—

*Phaedra*

I will not send the father against the son.

I never named <sup>^</sup>him.<sup>88</sup>

However dubious Jeffers' metrics appear to some,<sup>89</sup> his forceful measures have little stamp of an age upon them, paralleling the ageless themes of the poetry. Yet the thought occurs that since Jeffers' doctrine is so uncompromising, his means of support is comparatively uncontrolled, and a loss of unity may result.



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## THE ACHIEVEMENT

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### THE BALANCE BETWEEN PHILOSOPHER AND POET

Radcliffe Squires suggests indirectly that Jeffers is more philosopher than poet when he says that the present need in critically examining Jeffers' narratives centers "in their philosophical texture, in the relationship of idea to idea rather than the relationship of word to word, nuance to nuance."<sup>1</sup> If this is so, and this essay agrees that it is, Jeffers' philosophy has greater potential significance than his expression. Of the critical materials read for this essay, very few emphasized Jeffers' methods. They concentrated on what his belief is, on the symbols, and on the conflicts that emerge from his poetry. Of course, the nuances are not baffling, since the poetry is not built upon shadings and complexities of diction, and thus need less critical examination for understanding. Jeffers reverses the usual poetic relationship of words to ideas, using his beliefs about man and the world as the substance of his poetry.<sup>2</sup> The memorable lines from a Jeffers' poem are often not dependent upon felicity of language, imagery, or rhythmic effects, but on a conceptual statement that stands out boldly. Consider "The Trap."

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I am not well civilized, really alien here: trust me not.  
I can understand the guns and the airplanes,  
The other conveniences leave me cold.

"We must adjust our economics to the new abundance . . ."

Of what? Toys: motors, music-boxes,  
Paper, fine clothes, leisure, diversion.

I *honestly believe* (but really an alien here: trust me not)

*Blind war, compared to this kind of life,  
Has nobility, famine has dignity.*

Be happy, adjust your economics to the new abundance;

One is neither saint nor devil, to wish  
The intolerable nobler alternative.<sup>3</sup>

The italicized words (this writer's) are the significant core of the poem, and could have been a statement in prose if we look for lyric, grace of diction, rhythm, or imagery to distinguish them as poetry. This example, although severe, is representative of some of Jeffers' later writing. His philosophy seems to encompass him with such force that he neglects to enhance it with poetic form, resorting to colloquialisms, like "Leave me cold," which jar us with their slangy laxness; however, if we do not remember the italicized words as poetry, we will not easily forget their meaning as an assertion in Jeffers' creed. I do not intend to offer for comparison the touchstones of Matthew Arnold, but when most of us think of the lines that have been significant to us for their poetic glitter, they often have no message for us except the beauty of their words in combination. On the other hand, again going to Shelley (Shelley's influence on Jeffers as a young man has been noted),<sup>4</sup> who believes that the poet's function is to be a legislator of laws and philosophy, we can-



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not deny this right to Jeffers any more than we can to Sophocles. The point here is that the philosophy sometimes lacks valid poetic expression which leaves the message, rather than the essence, in predominance.

In the early narratives, which gave him recognition as a world poet, going beyond Aeschylus, Euripides, Sophocles in "style and form as well as in the dreadfulness of his themes,"<sup>5</sup> Jeffers worked to heighten his philosophy with magnificence of language. The results are explicit in a belief and simultaneously manifest in poetic sound and imagery:

Humanity is

the start of the race; I say  
Humanity is the mould to break away from, the crust  
to break through, the coal to break into fire,  
The atom to be split.<sup>6</sup>

It is not surprising that these lines appear in so many critical essays about Jeffers, not only because they are the beginnings of his creed, but because they have grandeur. But when a poet spends hundreds of lines in reinforcing one idea, it is conceivable that many of the succeeding lines will not have the inspirational vigor of the first even though the philosophy gains in momentum. In *Poets at Work*, a book dealing with the process of poetic creation, Donald Stauffer mentions one way a poet works toward his goal as a "continuous struggle to strip off rhetoric" for economy, as opposed to extravagance.<sup>7</sup> This observation could apply to one of Jeffers' shortcomings, his inclination to over-write. When this happens, we are conscious of redundancy and a lack of discipline that channels and focuses both experience and lan-

guage into a unique poetic fusion. Such a tendency seems to be due to the unyielding grip Jeffers' philosophy has upon him, subjecting his poetry to idea and to an urgency to be heard and heeded. If this is true, then Jeffers may rightfully be seen as a poet dominated by his philosophy.

## A J U D G M E N T

Then what is our response to this philosophic poetry? Are we swayed through Jeffers' eloquent execution to a sympathetic understanding of his doctrine? Are we convinced, at least during the time of reading, that Jeffers' conception of how to conquer humanity's dilemma is so artistically satisfying that it is also intellectually and emotionally compatible? These responses would seem to be the test of the success of much of this poetry that is grounded solidly in an effort to instruct. Inhumanism, like other disillusioned philosophies, is aimed at freeing man from myths, superstitions, the fear of death, and at giving him a code by which to live. Similar attempts to disenchant man are evidenced as early as "The Song of the Harper," an anonymous poem written by an Egyptian more than 1600 years before Ecclesiastes, another disillusioned work trying to enlighten man. The *Rubaiyat* by Omar Khayyam follows in this tradition nine hundred years later; in the eighteenth century Voltaire used biting satire to project his bleak message in *Candide*. So we are reminded that many authors have succeeded in making their cheerless philosophies felt and remembered because their artistic performances have qualities to insure lasting appreciation. Then it follows that

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Jeffers' ultimate achievement rests on his ability to enamour us through his poetry, regardless of the antipathy or affinity we may feel toward the philosophy. When the philosophy becomes the major issue, as in "The Trap," mentioned above, without adequate poetic support, we may react indifferently to what he says if we cannot agree with the concept. But "The Trap," indicative of some of his writing, is not illustrative of all.

### *The Narratives*

Jeffers chose tragedy as the genre preferred by him. As he explains in Lawrence C. Powell's book, it is most often selected by the poets "because pain, being more intense than pleasure produces stronger emotions."<sup>8</sup> All of his narratives can aptly be called tragedy, as opposed to comedy, if only for the reason that they all end in death and destruction. Yet death and destruction can produce merely the terrible and the shocking if they do not perform an artistic function. Since many of Jeffers' tragedies are rooted in Greek tragedy, it seems evident that he admires these great plays from which Aristotle made his observations. And therefore it seems justifiable to apply some of Aristotle's derived principles to the dramatic narratives. Considering character and its necessary function in true tragedy, Aristotle says that "Tragedy is an imitation of persons who are above the common level," who should be "true to life and yet more beautiful."<sup>9</sup> And he concludes with, "The poet, in representing men who are irascible or indolent, or have other defects of character, should preserve the type and yet ennoble it."<sup>10</sup> On Aris-

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totalitarian terms Jeffers does not succeed. His one-sided personalities, which do not develop with the story, seem more like flat types or abstractions of passions, so unreal do they appear against the stark realism of their environment. Their unreality makes it difficult for us to identify ourselves with these characters so that pity and fear result.

When Fayne Fraser climbs the cliff from burying her suicide-husband, we do not vibrate to the great strength of a noble woman bearing her sorrow, because her inhumanism should save her from experiencing a deep grief for the husband upon whom she brought disaster. She, herself, is beyond pity, because we have been conditioned to know that she will survive as the bitter victor in any situation. When Howard Howren goes back to take the punishment for murdering his father because "There are certain duties/ Even for . . . what did you say? . . . modern man,"<sup>11</sup> we do not feel relief that the protagonist is fulfilling his duty by possible sacrifice of his life, because he had never valued life highly, contemplating suicide from the beginning. Margrave's inhumanism parallels Raskolnikov's superman attitude in *Crime and Punishment* only in the initial stage, for while the young Russian suffers and repents so that at the novel's end he shines forth a finer-edged human being, Margrave doggedly believes in his murder's justification until he hangs himself to spare himself.

If we measure the narratives' impacts by the fear and pity<sup>12</sup> they arouse, we find a certain lack. It is hard for us to fear because of the intangible quality of these people. It is hard to experience a deep pity because the characters are alien to us,

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seldom pausing to wrestle with a moral decision. And the hoped-for katharsis, the cleansing and purifying of mind and emotion that is essential to Aristotle's final definition of tragedy, is only vaguely produced. Denying the importance of plot in *Oedipus Rex* and the *Agamemnon* series, Jeffers writes, as previously quoted, "What makes them noble is the poetry, the poetry and the beautiful shapes of the plays, and the extreme violence born of extreme passion."<sup>13</sup> Jeffers says nothing about characters contributing their nobility to the plays. He is conscious, however, of the added attraction of morally responsible characters when he says of "Thurso's Landing" that it "seems to me to be the best thing I have written . . . the persons seem to me to be a little more conscious of the moral implications of what they do."<sup>14</sup> In a review of Jeffers' last book Horace Gregory writes that "The Cretan Woman" is more successful than "Hungerfield" in which the figures "are less heroic, and of a nearly sub-human world."<sup>15</sup> But it is this sub-human world in which Jeffers has specialized from the beginning, this world of passion without control, of supernatural communings with spirits, of hopelessness and sickness, of misery for the living. The characters involved are sucked under by the dreadfulness of their fate, seldom resisting for the good cause, or for abstract virtue. They are not tragic if we are looking for the element of nobility in them.

But one point relating to Jeffers' intention should be mentioned here: his statement about the great poet's concern being to "habitually address" future audiences.<sup>16</sup> Those audiences may have an entirely different attitude toward this

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poetry. If Jeffers is writing toward a time in which he believes inhumanistic values will have replaced our present ethics, it is conceivable that his characterizations would receive greater sympathy—if sympathy is still permitted—than we can extend. The characters' merits would depend on their ability to reject such human "frailties" as grief, compassion toward mankind, sacrifice of one for another. Under this naturistic and mechanistic banner, Jeffers' radicalism would prevail as the new vision of temperance, and his characters would emerge as noble figures, or as Jeffers would prefer, realistic ones, at least. He is not a flatterer of humanity, as we have seen, and disparages the illusory ideals others have attempted to bestow upon it:

Michelangelo  
and the Greek sculptors—  
How they flattered the race! Homer and Shakes-  
peare—  
How they flattered the race!<sup>17</sup>

In this same vein Jeffers, addressing himself in "Soliloquy," says:

August and laurelled have been content to speak for  
an age, and the ages that follow  
Respect them for that pious fidelity;  
But you have disfeatured time for timelessness.  
They had heroes for companions, beautiful youths to  
dream of, rose-marble-fingered  
Women shed light down the great lines;  
But you have invoked the slime in the skull,  
The lymph in the vessels.<sup>18</sup>

So we must not mistake the fact that Jeffers is unaware of what he has done or what he hopes to accomplish: "to disgust and shock," in order "to turn humanity outward from its obsession."<sup>19</sup>



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Even though we know Jeffers' intention, in trying to make a critical observation about the dramatic poems, we have only the critical tools of this age with which to work. And we are still under the impression that all art accomplishes its function only when it creates beauty and order from disunity or chaos. Beauty and order are hard to perceive in Jeffers' characters as they fulfill their place in the narratives.

Although the defective characters contribute to a dissatisfaction with the truly tragic quality of the narratives, there are other factors to be considered, structure and mood being two I shall touch on here. Herbert Read tells us that the distinction between the major and minor poet is in their ability to write a long poem successfully.<sup>20</sup> The ideal, as he conceives it, is a structure which carries the poet on from word to word, line to line, stanza to stanza, and book to book.<sup>21</sup> Otherwise, a poem loses its original inspiration. When inspiration lags, either of two effects may occur. Either the "pure poetry" overwhelms the forward motion, so that we are constantly looking for threads to hold the poem together, or the story usurps the poetry with over-emphasis on what Mr. Read calls "prose padding."<sup>22</sup> Jeffers does not write much "pure poetry"; he seems to be prompted mainly by the action of the poems which carries him along on the circuit of inspiration. When the action rises to one great climax, falling rapidly afterwards, we have a classic development, as in "Roan Stallion." The unity of the style, rhythm, and structure produces its most dramatic impact so that the reader does not wander from its forward-moving energy until the last lines are read.



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Whatever we may personally think of California, we have been brought close to understanding her through the poetic experience. When themes as desperate as Jeffers' are presented, they need concentrated power of expression to sustain the reader to the ending lines. This is especially true in some of the longer poems which are treated in chapters that linger and digress at the expense of forward continuity.

This kind of amorphous structure is used for such poems as "Thurso's Landing" and *The Women at Point Sur*. When these digressions, or series of small climactic actions, occur, Jeffers' readers have time to pause and consider whether they can further pursue the suffering and self-inflicted agonies. Conversation, such as "Nobody else/ Seems to have kept them down in my absences,"<sup>23</sup> frequently interrupts, and again we lose the essence of poetry. Such "prose padding" accounts for much of the narratives' lengths, which means that we continue reading for meaning and plot rather than for poetic effects. Nor can rhythm add much to the intensification of the material, since it, also, is of a nebulous nature. So the structural unity is often disrupted, and we step into the bordering realm of prose. This criticism can be applied to many long poems, other than Jeffers', because it is so difficult for poets to sustain images and action over many pages. Yet it is a fault, since verse can be "superior to prose only in the comeliness of that form itself, and the superior terseness which usually goes along with it."<sup>24</sup>

If complete unity of structure seems to be lacking in the narratives, unity of mood and atmosphere does not. Here Jeffers is a master. From the

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first to the last lines we are immersed in a tragic world, dream-laden with violence and anguish. As Dostoievski depicts a gray Russian world, Jeffers draws his with blood-images against fogs and treacherous promontories. Only occasionally are we allowed a glimpse of a happy, normal way of living. Even in the kitchens, where warmth and family love are usual conventions, Jeffers uses attempted suicide<sup>25</sup> and book-burning<sup>26</sup> to overcome any presupposed idea about the friendly family hearth. The background of raging nature, together with the distorted lives of the characters merge in turbulent images. All are underscored by the heavy, sometimes ponderous meter that supplies the muffled rhythm. Few readers of Jeffers can forget the oppressive mood he generates. It is a mood of black romanticism which brings into focus the doctrine as well as the dourness of tone, and we may be convinced, as Jeffers wants us to be, that life needs a reevaluation if things are really so bad. Through this depressing convergence of image, setting, subject, and tone, Jeffers comes closest to achieving his purpose, and we begin to believe that "We must uncenter our minds from ourselves"<sup>27</sup> to escape catastrophe. If we could feel a strong sympathy toward the characters and could be carried forward on a highly stabilized plane of poetic expression, Jeffers, through his able creation of mood, could doubtless enmesh us in his way of thinking.

### *The Short Poems*

Remaining to consider are the short poems, the psalms to nature, in which the poet praises the strength, the endurance, the perennial beauty of

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his land. These are the poems which may survive, if we were to take a long-range view, long after the narratives have been forgotten. Jeffers' voice is raised in tribute to the cypresses, granite, the night, the sea, and the "Earnest elements of nature."<sup>28</sup> His philosophy in these poems becomes secondary to the language and the imagery which use nature as a mirror to reflect more intensely our own blemishes. Robert Penn Warren believes that his short poems "tend to be fragmentary comments, gnomic utterances without adequate context."<sup>29</sup> Many do lack sufficient form; they fall short of a complete unity. But this critic's statement is not applicable to all. Just because a poem is not built around a metaphysical conceit or is without a key metaphor to guide its form are not reasons why it is not a good poem. These short poems of Jeffers are simple and forthright, charged with electric word-power, and could speak to generations to come as they could to our early civilizations. They are primitive in their expression, but so is "The Song of Deborah," *The Bhagavad-Gita*, and the Psalms. The following poem is selected as an example of one of Jeffers' poems which has attained and should continue to maintain distinction. Its language grinds and chips like the chisel; "splits," "Fall down," "Scale," "wear," "blotted out," "die," "blacken" press in until no life is left. The motion is sweeping downward, and we are without hope until the rescuing "Yet" appears. Following the polar comparison between poet and stone-cutter, the tension is released and the poem ends on a wistful note of half-hearted consolation, even though a time limitation of a thousand years is the best the poet can offer:

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Stone-cutters fighting time with marble, you fore-  
defeated

Challengers of oblivion

Eat cynical earnings, knowing rock splits, records fall  
down,

The square-limbed Roman letters

Scale in the thaws, wear in the rain. The poet as well

Builds his monument mockingly;

For man will be blotted out, the blithe earth die, the  
brave sun

Die blind and blacken to the heart:

Yet stones have stood for a thousand years, and pained  
thoughts found

The honey of peace in old poems.<sup>30</sup>

This poem, "Night," "Hurt Hawks," "De Rerum Virtute," "Continent's End," "Granite and Cypress," "The Cruel Falcon," and many others are such poems, controlled, powerful, reverent. They not only adhere to Jeffers' three prerequisites for survival: permanence, nobility of poetry, and the avoidance of epoch confusions, they are more. They are little dramatic structures that transcend his philosophy of inhumanism and stand free of doctrine. They are artistic entities in themselves, not involvements in rhetoric and idea, only. In them Jeffers does not deviate from the tone, the imagery, the urgency of the narratives, but he is able to sustain his lyrical mood, without interruption, until the last line is read. This concentration, often dependent upon paradox ("bright power" and "dark peace,"<sup>31</sup> "Granite and Cypress"<sup>32</sup>) is the central difference between the artistic quality of the short poems and the narratives. It is this kind of communication to which A. E. Housman has reference when he writes, "I think that to transfuse emotion—not to transmit thought but to set up in the reader's sense a vibra-

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tion corresponding to what was felt by the writer—is the peculiar function of poetry.”<sup>33</sup> Because of the concentration, we are caught up in an emotional experience that surpasses the creed. The poem, itself, becomes the end rather than the means for writing.

If we could look ahead as Jeffers says the great poet must in “Poetry, Gongorism, and a Thousand Years,” we may perhaps find some of those poems listed above lending their “honey of peace” to the “pained thoughts” of those years. We may discover that Jeffers, like Lucretius, has gained new appreciation. Or we may find no trace of him except in tomes on the history of American Literature. Whatever the future holds for this poet, our own age is still awed by the magnificent talent and effort of a burdened mind struggling to free humanity from the shackles of an impoverished self-love, and the myths to which he believes it gave birth.

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